SPECIAL
Delivery
HEIDI CULLINAN

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This story is dedicated to
my husband, Daniel Cullinan,
because he would not let me quit
writing this story no matter how I tried.
Dan, this story is all for you.

Love, Heidi.

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Chapter 1

IN THE deserted men's restroom at the back of Middleton Community College, Sam Keller knelt on the tile, braced his hands against Keith Jameson's thighs, and broke his mother's heart.

It didn't matter that Sharyle Keller had passed away four years ago. Sam knew his mother would feel that what Sam was doing in the handicapped stall was a complete and total mockery of everything she'd ever taught him. It wasn't that she would have been upset that Sam was gay, or even that he was about to give a blow job at school and risk expulsion for "sexual congress on campus." What would have upset his mother was that Sam wasn't at all attracted to his partner. To be perfectly honest, Sam hated him.

"Sex is beautiful," Sam's mother had told him. "Sex is a union between two people. Sex is a merging of souls, a holy connection. Sex is sacred, and it should only be given to those you love."

When Sam's mother had told him this, he'd been twelve. He'd been very, very horny, but he was also scared to death of sex, so when his mother told him he should wait for someone who loved him, he'd nodded eagerly. Yes, he would only trust his body to those who knew the worth of it. Yes, he would learn from her mistakes. He'd signed on for it all, trusting in his mother's wisdom, wanting to be safe and wanting to please her too. After all, wasn't he lucky to have a mother who looked *forward* to meeting his boyfriends, who hoped he'd want to adopt or hire a surrogate to have his child someday because she'd be more than happy to babysit? It seemed such a little, easy thing for him to promise her, that he would only give himself in love.

But even before he'd realized what an incredible dearth of loving male partners there were to be had in Middleton, Iowa, Sam had struggled with his vow. His mother had found him gay support groups and sex tip sites online, but Sam had found the porn. He'd lost days in the images of beautiful, slender men bent in submission and sometimes degradation, and to his quiet horror, he realized that this was his fantasy: he, like those boys on the Internet, wanted to be used. He wanted to be loved and cherished, yes. But he also wanted to be *fucked*. Sometimes he didn't want it to be about love. He wanted it to be about sex, and about semen, and about not quite exactly being in control. He didn't want to get hurt, no. But he admitted to himself that he wanted to come really, really close.

He thought, as he swirled his tongue around Keith's shaft and looked up at the blond boy's unshaven chin, that he'd have been a lot happier if he could have found himself a Keith at sixteen instead of twenty-one. He'd been fucking Darin Yarvin since his senior year of high school, but that was just a weekly appointment to kneel on a pizza box in Darin's dirty apartment and take it up the ass. Blowing Keith flirted with so many taboos that at first Sam had gotten himself off just thinking about upcoming encounters.

Keith was straight. He wasn't bi. He wasn't in the closet. He wasn't even curious. He just liked having his dick sucked, and he liked telling Sam what to do as much as Sam liked to do it. He was a big, buff boy, a small-town Iowa ideal. And it was Sam's fondest wish that someday that ideal young man would bend him over one of the toilets and bury his cock so deep and hard inside Sam that he would see stars. Sam didn't want to kiss him. He didn't want to hold him or take him on a date. In fact, outside of arranging their sexual appointments, they didn't even speak to one another. The only conversation they had was the one they were having now, where Keith asked Sam if he wanted him to shove his big fat cock into his throat, to fuck his mouth, and Sam agreed, breathlessly, that he did want this, very much please, and thank you.

"You like sucking my cock, don't you bitch?" Keith would say, and Sam would nod, and shut his eyes, and let the incredible sluttiness of the experience wash over him in dark, beautiful waves until he was thrusting himself onto Keith as hard as Keith was pushing into him, sucking so hard he hurt his cheeks, moaning along with Keith as he

cried out and exploded, hot and thick and salty into Sam's open, waiting throat. Sometimes, like he was now, Keith would knead at Sam's hair unconsciously as Sam swallowed once, then again, then again, and then again. Keith would always realize what he was doing and push Sam away, but Sam liked the gesture and privately cherished it.

This more than anything else would have upset his mother, that he would know only such a weak, fleeting bit of tenderness and from such a crude, cruel partner.

Keith's abrupt removal today had left one last trail of semen to drizzle over Sam's chin, and he wiped it away with his fingers and reached for some toilet paper. Keith watched him, but when Sam looked up and met his gaze, Keith looked away and made quick work of buttoning himself.

"You suck good cock," he declared, making the compliment a sneer.

Sam waited, remaining on his knees. This part was always the trickiest, and he held still, lowering his eyes, letting Keith decide when they were finished. If Keith had more abuse to hurl, he'd take it, because the last thing he needed was for Keith to feel nervous or threatened. He needed Keith to feel strong and satisfied and a little superior, because that way he would want to do it again, which was what Sam wanted him to want. It wasn't ideal, but in its own way, it worked. So he waited, docile, until Keith spoke again.

"You gonna suck it again next Wednesday?"

Sam kept his head ducked to hide his smile, and he nodded. He held still until Keith left the stall, and he stayed on his knees until Keith had left the restroom altogether. Then he rose, adjusted his own erection in his pants, and went to the bathroom sink to wash his hands.

Sam looked at his reflection in the mirror as he lathered soap across his palms. It was his mother's face he saw looking back at him, slender and pretty, dark brown hair tousled around large, dark eyes. The only differences were the length of his hair and the shape of his jaw and his chin, which in addition to being slightly more defined than his mother's, sported the tiniest spattering of beard stubble. In his own face, he saw the face he had loved so much, the face he had assumed, naively, would be around for a long, long time. He looked into its echo

now, thought of what he had just done, of what she must be thinking of him now, and his heart grew heavy.

"Sorry, Mom," he whispered.

He wiped the last bit of Keith's semen from his chin and went to class.

THE problem was, Sam decided later as he trudged home from campus, was that he really wanted kinky. Yes, he wanted love. He wanted to date and hold hands and make the squeamish conservatives that made up his northern Iowa town squirm in their twinsets. Now that it was legal, he wanted to get married. But he wanted hot sex too. *Hot* sex. He wanted to try it all, every position, every fetish. Well, not *every* fetish—a lot of them, though. He wanted an *orgy*, or at least a threesome. All the things about sex that his mother said were bad, all the objectification, all the cold, meaningless encounters—that was what he was after. He didn't know why. He just knew that he wanted it.

And as he wove his way through the well-manicured lawns of Cherry Hill Estates, he admitted that so long as he lived with his aunt and uncle, kinky was going to be very hard to come by.

Uncle Norm and Aunt Delia lived on Cherry Hill Court, their three-thousand-square-foot neo-Queen Anne (with four-car garage) sprawled over the top of *the* Cherry Hill, which in the days when the development had been farmland actually had been lined with cherry trees. Delia, who hated mess, had cut them all down and replaced them with red, green, and yellow shrubbery spaced by perfectly rounded boulders and mulched within an inch of their uninspired lives. They were the same boring ornamentation that graced every lawn in the development, but they had one advantage: the shrubs, combined with the lack of fences (to better preserve the view of the rolling hillside) made it incredibly easy to cut across country.

Sam did this now, singing softly under his breath along with the music playing on his iPhone, sometimes pausing to pull up the texting interface and read an incoming tweet or answer a text. He sighed over Kylie Minogue's report on her next stop on her US tour, wishing he could be there, memorized the discount code from Los Dos Amigos

restaurant, and with a low-grade arousal told Darin that yeah, he could swing by later tonight for a quick fuck.

When the phone rang, he checked the ID, paused his music, and clicked “answer.”

“Hi, Emma,” he said.

“Are you on it?” she cried, her excitement pushing her volume so high Sam had to pull the ear bud a little ways out of his ear. “Oh my God, are you on the *iPhone*?”

Sam beamed. “Emma, it is *so cool.* I mean, the headphones have a *microphone*. I’m totally talking into it *right now*.”

Emma squealed. “I can’t wait to see it! You’re bringing it in to work, right?”

“It’s never leaving my side. *Ever.*” He reached into his pocket and stroked the cool metal lovingly. “I have my *whole music library on here*! I can’t believe I was nervous about getting it. It was worth every penny.”

“Yeah, now all you have to do is pay for the monthly plan.”

Sam winced. “Don’t remind me. It’s good this thing plays movies, because I’ll never be able to afford going to the theater again.”

“You need to ask your aunt for a raise.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen right about the time she marches in the pride parade.” Sam hopped over a patch of foliage and veered toward the highway, the last obstacle between himself and Cherry Hill.

“So, actually, I have something to ask you,” Emma said. “A favor.”

Sam paused in mid-step, instantly wary of his best friend asking a favor. “Okay.”

“I want you to ask your uncle if I can rent one of his apartments.”

Sam snorted and started walking again. “You want a kidney too?”

“Sam! I’m serious. I’m tired of living in my parents’ house. Aren’t you? Of living with your aunt and uncle, I mean?”

“God yes. But I can’t afford to move out, and last I checked, neither could you. What are you planning to pay rent with? Your biology notes?”

“I had an idea about that, actually.”

The sugarcoating on her voice made Sam stop walking again. “Yes?”

“I thought,” she said, her tone still overly bright, “that *we* could be roommates. Now just *hold on*,” she said hurriedly, when Sam broke into peals of bitter laughter. “It could *work.* Come on, Sam, admit it. It would be so fun! We get along great! And your aunt—”

“Would never agree to this,” he interrupted.

“Would be happy to get you out of the house,” she said, ignoring him.

Sam ran his hand through his hair and shook his head. “Emma, she hates me, yes, and she hates having me living in her basement. But what she hates more than anything is paying for me, and there’s no way I could afford an apartment without Norm and Delia’s help. My aunt already resents what she has to fork over for part-time classes, which is *why* I’m part time, as you well know.”

“But that’s the *thing*—if it’s one of your uncle’s apartments—”

“It’s still money out of their pockets, in their mind.”

“But *listen,*” Emma said, and she launched into another round of arguments.

Sam did listen, sort of, making occasional grunts and sounds of agreement or acknowledgment, but mostly he just let her keep talking, because it was easier than trying to convince her that his aunt and his uncle were not going to go for this plan no matter how she sold it. He was focused more on trying to think of how exactly he was going to ask them, because he knew he had to try, or he’d catch hell from Emma. And really, it was too bad it wasn’t going to work, because she was right, it would be great to live with Emma. It just wasn’t going to happen, not until he got his own job, which he couldn’t get until he finished school, which at the rate he was going might be sometime around the time he reached retirement age.

He pretended anyway for Emma as he came up the last crest and onto the road. But between listening to Emma and glancing back and forth on the road as he tried not to get hit by traffic, he almost ran smack into the semi that was parked along the side of the road in front of the path onto his aunt and uncle’s hill.

It was *huge*. The trailer was the same length as normal trailers, but the cab was an absolute monster. It seemed at least twice as long as the ones he was used to seeing, and it was also a bright, bright blue.

It also had a very nice ass sticking out of the hood.

The driver—Sam assumed it was the driver—was fixing something, or checking a fluid, and he was bent over at the waist, leaning in so far that the only parts of him visible were his legs and a pleasantly shaped, jean-clad backside. As Emma continued to launch her apartment campaign at him, Sam ducked behind a black Dodge pickup and headed as close to the trucker butt as he dared. Still unsatisfied from his bathroom appointment with Keith, it didn't take but a few seconds of Hot Trucker Fantasy to send all spare blood cells due south. Very likely the guy had a face like the bottom of a boot, which made it all the better that it wasn't visible. Sam admired his features from as close a distance as he dared, knowing that later tonight he'd be imagining himself bent over a fender with strong, grease-coated hands gripping his hips and sliding back to part him before the trucker—

"Sam!"

Sam blinked, stumbled, and jerked his attention back to the phone. "Huh?"

"You aren't even listening to me!"

"Sorry." Sam stepped over another series of bushes and started up the hill toward his aunt and uncle's house. "There was something on the road that caught my attention. What were you saying?"

"I asked if your aunt was going to be at the pharmacy this afternoon, because we could ask her first, and then work on your uncle."

"Today? You want to ask about the apartment *today*?"

"Well, yeah! We could be in by the end of the month! It'd be great!"

Sam vaulted the last series of bushes and fumbled with the keys to his basement entrance. God, he'd wanted a few days at least to plan his strategy. But maybe this would be better—get it over with. "Sure."

"*Yes.* Okay—so, I'm gonna head. When will you be in?"

Sam pulled out the phone and checked the time. “Give me fifteen minutes. That’s the fastest I can manage.”

“Don’t be late,” she warned him, and then she hung up.

Sam tugged the ear buds out and put his keys in the lock.

The house was empty and silent as a tomb. Sam moved through the immaculate den and down the hall to his room, where he dumped his backpack on the bed before falling onto it himself. He lay there for a few seconds, staring at his bookshelf without really seeing it. Then he reached into the plastic crate beside his bed, pulled out a can of sparkling water, and cracked it open. He sipped at it while he lay back on his pillow and surfed the Internet on his phone, not quite adept at it yet but still loving the idea that he *could* do it whenever he had cell service. He played a word on his never-ending Facebook Scrabble game with Emma, tried to think of something to tweet, but then gave up, put his phone away, and wandered upstairs.

Living in Aunt Delia and Uncle Norm’s house was like living inside a Pottery Barn showcase, and it drove Sam crazy. But for where he was headed now, he had to give himself the full tour, and as always, he felt disgusted by the opulence and waste. To Delia, her picture-perfect home was a source of pride. To Sam—who had grown up in a crowded, messy trailer with a mother who hadn’t been able to stand on her own after he was ten, let alone arrange knickknacks and silk flowers—it just made him feel more alone.

Once he made it to the living room, though, he didn’t feel quite so solitary.

The urn Delia had chosen for her sister’s ashes was elegant and gleaming and not at all what Sharyle Keller would have wanted, and certainly it hadn’t been Sam’s vote. Even so he always felt better when he saw it, because he knew his mother was inside. He went up to her now, placing his fingers on the bottom of the urn and resting the butt of his palm against the walnut mantel.

“Hi, Mom.” His fingers curled against the gilded handle of her resting place. “Miss you.”

He never felt any weird vibes from the urn, never felt ghostly fingers caress his shoulder, no matter how many times or how long he waited for them, but it still felt good to stand here, touching the container that held the little bit of her that was left outside of his

memories. The anxiety of having to ask Delia and Norm about the apartment eased a little, and even the shame of Keith faded to a degree, just by being near her. But that was the way it had always been with his mom. She fixed everything just by being with you.

He stood there until he felt completely calm, leaned forward, and kissed the base of the ornate china. "Gotta go to work. Love you." He headed for the front door.

He reset the alarm, hurried out, and locked the door before bee-lining for his beat-up Civic that Delia made him hide around the side of the house behind a boxwood hedge. When the Civic took a moment to turn over, he glanced at his watch and frowned, knowing he'd lingered too long and that Emma was going to be mad. Actually he was so late now that he was in danger of being tardy for his shift. It was hard to say whose anger he was more anxious over, Emma's or Delia's.

Once he got the car going, he had to use the highway to get out of Cherry Hill Estates, and despite the danger of two powerful women being angry with him, Sam slowed when he saw that the blue semi was still parked beside the road. The driver was just shutting the hood and heading for the door to the cab, and as Sam drove past at almost ten miles under the speed limit, he got a good look at his face.

Not like the bottom of a boot, he acknowledged, quickly editing his upcoming fantasy. Not like the bottom of a boot at all.

EMMA was waiting for Sam at the front of the store when he got there. She was standing next to Delia, who was at the front counter sorting through a purchase order. Behind them, half-obscured by a shelf of antacids, his uncle was blithely surfing the Internet.

Sam's uncle Norman was one of the last independently operating pharmacists in the state of Iowa. He owned Biehl Drug, a store so old that it had been there since the town of Middleton was founded in 1889. By rights an independent pharmacy shouldn't have been able to operate with a Walmart pharmacy *and* a Walgreens in town, but Norman had some good nursing home contracts, and to pad his income he played the stock market and rented property. He rented a *lot* of property, to the point that he had a near monopoly on most of the apartments in town.

Delia managed all of them. Delia managed *everything,* including Uncle Norman.

She looked up when she saw Sam, and she didn't smile.

"You're almost late," she pointed out, flipping another page on the order sheet.

"Sorry." Sam reached around the counter to pull out his apron and fumbled with the ties after he looped the noose of the bib over his head. "Did the truck come in yet?"

Emma's pasted on smile was strained. Sam glared at her. What, he was supposed to initiate the conversation too?

Delia missed the look, as she was still scanning her order sheet. "Yes. It's all in the back, waiting for you." She lowered the form and gave Sam a pointed look. "The diabetic supplies are almost out, and they didn't get put on the order list. Why didn't you tell me when you checked stock last weekend?"

Sam held up a defensive hand. "I did tell you! I put a note in your in-tray."

"Well I didn't see it," Delia snapped. "And now we're out. And you know very well Harriet Meeker will talk of nothing else at the Ladies' League as soon as she discovers it."

Sam *had* put it in her tray, and he was about to point out to her that if she hadn't found it, it was her fault when he caught a glance at Emma's pleading, desperate face. *God, woman, but you owe me.* He gritted his teeth into a smile as he turned back to his aunt. "I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want me to go buy her usual at Walmart and keep it on hand in case she shows up?"

Delia waved his offer away. "Just tell me next time." She dropped the pile of mail in disgust and rubbed her forehead as if trying to grind out a headache.

Sam turned to Emma automatically for some support and found she was still giving him intense *Talk about the apartment already!* vibes. Sam folded his arms over his chest and stared meaningfully at Emma. *No way,* he telegraphed right back. *You're starting it.*

Emma gave him one last pleading look, but when Sam just shook his head, she wiped her hands on her own apron and turned to Delia.

“Mrs. Biehl,” she began, in her brightest, shiniest voice. “I had this idea, and I wanted to know what you thought of it.”

Delia put down the invoice and turned to Emma, softening a little. “Yes, Emma? How can I help you?”

“I talked it over with my parents, and we were thinking,” Emma began in the same megawatt tone, “that it was time I got into an apartment of my own. You know, for responsibility and all.”

Delia smiled. “I think that’s very wise. Were you wanting to rent one of ours? Because I know a perfect little place opening up this summer. The one above the bookshop, just up the hill?”

Emma’s hands stopped bunching together in her apron and clasped together in front of her chest instead. “Oh, Mrs. Biehl, that would be great!” She turned to Sam. “Wouldn’t that be *perfect* for us?”

Sam tried to shake his head in warning, but Delia’s eyes were already on him, sharp as a hawk’s, her smile washed away. “Us?”

Sam held up his hands. “I—”

“I thought maybe Sam and I could room together,” Emma said quickly. “Right, Sam?”

She looked at him—they both looked at him, expectant, and Sam faltered. What was he supposed to say? He felt flustered and angry. This was Emma’s scheme—couldn’t *she* say something?

Back in the pharmacy, Sam saw his uncle look up from the computer.

Delia gave Sam a very brittle smile. “And how were you going to pay your half of the rent?”

Sam felt, somehow, that there was some answer he was supposed to give, something that, if he could guess what it was, would make this go right. He searched for it—he really did, but his mind was a blank, and the silence pressed on him, making thinking even harder. “I, uh, don’t know,” Sam confessed at last. He looked at Emma and then at his uncle, but he found no help in either place. “I—I don’t know.”

Delia picked up the purchase order and began scanning it again. “When you find a roommate who can pay her half of the rent, Emma, the apartment is yours.” She glanced at Sam. “Your stock is waiting in the back.”

Sam's uncle went back to his computer, and Sam turned away, feeling foolish, but not really knowing why. "Sure," he murmured.

When he headed back toward the stockroom, there was no surprise at all that Emma followed him.

"What is *wrong* with you?" she demanded as soon as the door closed behind them.

Sam picked up a box of adult diapers from the pile by the door and tore back the flaps. "Don't yell at me, Emma. This was your plan, not mine."

"But you didn't say *anything*!" Emma protested. "You didn't even try!"

"You didn't give me any time to get anything ready," Sam grumbled, and pulled open the flaps of the box. "I don't *have* money, Em. I didn't know how to pull it out of my ass!"

"It isn't about money." Emma pushed the box closed. "Sam, I thought you wanted this. You're always telling me how much they drive you crazy. I thought you wanted out of there."

"I do," Sam agreed. God, he wanted nothing more. "But she's never going to agree. You heard her."

"Why do you always let her roll over you? Why don't you stick up for yourself for a change?"

"What am I going to say, Em?" Sam asked. "What sort of leverage do you think I have? They've paid for everything for me since I was in high school. They're paying for my college. They pay for my food, and they give me somewhere to live."

"They pay for your college because they have to," Emma shot back. "They feed you because it would look bad if you starved. If J.K. Rowling hadn't made it such a mark of Cain, I swear they'd put your room in the closet under the stairs. Your mother made them your guardians, and this is the responsibility that they took on when they accepted that job. You don't owe them, Sam. Stop acting like it."

Sam picked idly at the plastic wrappers visible beneath the open flap of the box. He knew Emma was right, knew that he should stand up for himself, but he didn't know how to explain to her that he didn't know how. "I just can't, Em," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Emma sighed and opened her mouth to launch into another lecture, but before she could the door to the store opened and Uncle Norman stuck his head inside.

"Emma?" he called politely. "I need you up front."

"Sure, Mr. Biehl." Emma turned back to Sam and poked a finger into the center of his chest. "We will talk later."

I'm sure we will. He was not looking forward to the conversation already. He watched her go, then pulled out his iPhone. He scrolled through his playlists, selected "Kylie Favorites" and tucked his ear buds in, ready to let Ms. Minogue take all his worries away.

But she hadn't even gotten through the first verse of "No More Rain" before the door from the front opened again. This time it was Delia who came into the stockroom.

His aunt was a small, slight woman, but her diminutive size somehow made her all the more terrible. Her features were similar to Sam's mother's, but while Sharyle Keller had been as soft and cozy as a stuffed animal, Delia was as cold and un-cuddly as a china doll. Sam's mother had loved yeast and sausage and chocolate, and once her disease relegated her to a wheelchair, she had no hope of burning it off. Hugging Sharyle had been a warm, soft experience. Delia ate organic salad with tofu, counted calories, and put in at least three miles a day on the elliptical machine across the hall from Sam's basement bedroom. Even if he'd wanted to hug his aunt, he'd have bruises from her bony frame.

Delia did not look like she wanted to hug him now.

She nodded at the half-opened box and folded her arms over her chest. "Were you thinking you should get paid for doing nothing in *addition* to asking for free rent?"

Sam pulled his ear buds out and started unloading the box. "Emma was talking to me, and then I just turned on my headphones."

Delia gave the pocket that held his iPhone a cold look. "I hope that *thing* isn't going to make your job performance even worse. If I catch you surfing the Internet while you're clocked in, I'll dock your pay."

"*Hey.*" Sam shoved the package onto a shelf and turned to her. "I do my job. I work hard." *A hell of a lot harder than Uncle Norman.*

Delia aimed a finger at him. "Just bear in mind, young man, that I've got my eye on you."

She left. Sam made a face, murmured "I've got my eye on you" in mocking sing-song under his breath, put his ear buds back in, and hoped that this time, maybe, he could be left alone to work.

Sam liked doing stock. Sometimes he did tech work behind the counter with his uncle, but he had to dress up and wear a lab coat there, deal with customers, and worst of all, put up with his aunt. In the stockroom, people left him alone.

In the stockroom, he could dance.

As discos went, shelves full of shampoo, BAND-AIDs, and rubbing alcohol made poor decor, but he had a wide floor to himself, and he'd long ago made an art form of reaching into a box, grabbing a bag or bottle, and inserting it onto the shelf in time to the beat. Emma teased him, warning that if his aunt found out she'd freak, but Sam had his argument for that ready: he was *faster* when he did his weird stock boy dance moves. He'd timed himself just to prove it, and he'd been right. Yes, he spun his way down the aisle and sang into bottles of Pert, but he was a full five minutes faster when he did it than when he didn't.

The best of all music to stock to was Kylie Minogue. He was partial to the *Light Years* album, but *X* was pretty good too. He'd made a playlist of the best of her whole career, and she sang it to him now. "All I See" took him through the Depends and Charmin, "Giving You Up" gave him the courage to face the madness that was sorting through a case of makeup with all its tiny, tiny packets that refused to lie orderly on a shelf, and "Sensitized" made him tap his toe all the way through bar soap, shaving cream, and cotton balls. By the time "Kids" came on, he was really in a groove. After breaking down the boxes he'd done so far, he shut his eyes and boogied backward with them out the door. Belting along with the chorus as he spun, he tossed the boxes into the Dumpster, swung his hips, and shimmied down the wall beside the rail.

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him stop short, and he blushed as he saw a man leaning on the back of a semitrailer that filled the alley, a trailer that was, he noted, attached to a bright blue cab. Eyes wide and heart pounding, Sam's eyes flicked back to the

man, the man who was the same as the one who had been climbing into the cab beside the road on Cherry Hill.

The man had a slow, wicked smile on his face, and he was clapping.

SAM tugged the ear buds out and backed up a step against the railing. He was standing on the pharmacy's loading dock, an ancient, slightly crumbling concrete structure that only sort of met the ramp of a delivery truck. The semi's trailer was backed against the dock on the opposite side of the alley that belonged to the bicycle shop, its metal ramp extended and jacked sideways to make a walkway. The driver, however, was standing on the ground about twenty feet away from Sam.

"Hi." Sam gave a feeble wave.

"Hello yourself, Sunshine." He said nothing else, just watched Sam for a minute, and when the silence went on too long, the trucker made a rough salute against his forehead as if tipping an invisible hat. Then he pushed off the side of the trailer, climbed up on the ramp, and started unloading again.

Sam watched him work. If Sam could have placed an order for a man, this would be what he ordered. The man was *ripped*. His muscular frame bulged through the thermal shirt rucked up around his elbows and filled out his jeans until they strained the seams. It was cooler now that evening was coming on, but the trucker was sweating enticingly from his exertions. He hefted huge boxes that strained under their own weight with ease and bore them away as if they were full of feathers. Best of all was when he crouched down to pick something up: Sam wished he dared to pull out his phone and snap a photo of the moment before the man started to rise, his seams straining, his perfect, *perfect* ass presented to Sam for a private viewing.

His face wasn't bad, either. He wasn't quite a Greek god, but he was very chiseled, his jaw peppered with stubble, his nose not pert and cute but not chunky, either. Good mouth. His lips weren't lush, but they weren't thin. They looked quite luscious, in fact, especially when the man's tongue snaked out between his teeth to wet them. The only flaw the man had at all was his hair. It was ragged, too long, and dull,

suggesting that the man washed it with a bar of Coast and got it cut with a butcher knife every three months.

Ah, straight men, Sam thought with a quiet regret.

The man turned, caught Sam still looking at him, and smiled again. And as the gesture turned dark, laced with invitation, Sam went still.

Maybe not straight?

You're imagining things. Even if he's gay, a guy like this is not going to come on to a scrawny little rat like you.

The delivery man's thumb stole up to his mouth and toyed lazily at the side of his lips, which had the effect of making Sam fill out his own jeans a bit more snugly.

"I got a camera in the front of my truck." The trucker spoke the words in a drawl so thick he practically applied it with a trowel. He jerked his head toward the front of the semi. "You could take a picture and make this last a bit longer."

Sam fought a blush and replied, his voice almost steady, "I've got one on the phone in my pocket, thanks."

The man planted his feet firmly on the ramp, lifted his square chin and held out his arms. "Well?"

Sam's hands were shaking, and his mind had shut down all thought outside of *oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God!*, but he managed to pull out his iPhone without dropping it, and his hand was almost stable as he fumbled with the camera function. He had no idea, though, where he found the chutzpah to lift his other hand and make a spinning motion with his finger as he said, "Turn around."

The man grinned, rubbed his thumb across his lips again, and did as he was told, boldly giving Sam a front-row view of his jean-clad ass. The tiny *click* of Sam's iPhone shutter seemed to echo like a gunshot through the alley. Sam felt surreal—happy, but surreal. This wasn't like anything that had happened to him before. This was… well, naughty, yes, but it wasn't the sort of naughty Sam was used to. It wasn't laced with shame at all. It was *fun*—light fun. It wasn't the quiet, desperate sex or parody of it that he was used to. It wasn't sex at all.

Yet.

The man glanced over his shoulder. Sam's thumb, still hovering on the camera button, quickly clicked again, but he cursed his timing when the man's mouth curved into a slow, delicious smile. He frantically pushed the button one more time, but he lowered the phone without looking to see if he'd captured the gesture.

"Thanks." Sam tucked the phone back into his pocket and gave what he hoped was a rakish and not constipated smile.

"Not a problem." The man turned back around, but he didn't go back to work. He just kept watching Sam, as if he didn't have a trailer full of stock to unload. Then Sam thought to peer inside and realized he saw hardly any more boxes at all, in fact. The man was done delivering.

And yet, he was still here, playing with Sam. Waiting for him to play back.

Sam tried to think of a witty rejoinder, or any rejoinder, but his mind was blank, still melting down to *oh God oh God oh God,* his dick helping nothing by pulsing like a nuclear bomb inside his pants.

"I'm Sam," he said at last, extending his hand. He realized the ridiculousness of the gesture when they were standing more than twenty feet apart. He tried to turn it into a wave but gave up and stuffed both hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "Hi."

"Howdy, Sam." He eased his stance and braced his arm against one of the open doors of the trailer. "Mitch Tedsoe, at your service." Another lazy smile stole across his lips, this one so wicked it practically came with its own arrest warrant. "You need anything delivered, Sunshine, I'm your man."

I am not cool enough to play this kind of game, Sam thought, panicked, but tried anyway. "You do seem like you know your way around a package."

"It's all in the handling," Mitch said, his drawl making the last word come out missing its g. "You have to treat them careful, but at the same time, you can't be afraid to be a little rough when the occasion calls for it."

Sam was now so far out of his element he was on another planet, but he couldn't seem to stop. It was one thing to mess with guys from school, but a total stranger? *Oh God, yes.* He gripped the metal rail and pressed his groin against it, willing the cold iron to permeate his jeans and calm him the hell down. "That sounds a little dangerous." It was a

lame comeback, but his brain cells were all shutting down as his libido ratcheted up. And if he didn't keep talking, this little play was going to end, and Sam was going to have to go back inside and unpack more boxes of Depends.

"Sunshine, I'm only as dangerous as you want me to be." Mitch gave him another lazy smile. "But something tells me you could use a little danger. And I bet you'd find you like it a little rough."

It was good Sam was holding onto the rail, and it was even better that it was a double rail, which turned out to be a handy support for failing knees. "Hhhnnnnh," he said, apparently out of vowels. He swallowed, drew a breath, and laughed, but it was shaky. "Okay," he said, breathless. "You got me."

A pair of blond eyebrows shot up. "Far as I can see, you're still up there on your little balcony and I'm all alone over here. I don't got anything, Sam."

And Sam had thought this was surreal before. Shit, this guy was actually propositioning him? Like, *now*? Here? In the *alley?* "Uh." His hands, despite the cold, were growing sweaty against the rail. "Aren't you—uh—working?"

Still the lazy smile. And he was looking at Sam's mouth. "I could use a break. You?"

It had to be some sort of joke. Or a mistake. Or something. Because this was the sort of fantasy Sam jacked off to alone in the dark at night. This wasn't even the sort of thing he *hoped* would happen to him. This sort of thing did not happen to Sam in real life, and it was never going to. Except, apparently, for right now.

Sam dropped the game and started doubting the situation out loud. "What, right here on the loading dock?"

"Naw." Mitch jerked his head toward the open door of the truck.

"Isn't it a bit cold?" Sam's voice was high and panicked. He couldn't stop looking at the open doors of the trailer. *Dark and close. And he's right. Nobody would see.* But this was a far cry from Keith in the handicapped stall. Keith he *knew*. Even Emma might not get behind this sexual adventure. This guy could kidnap him!

Yes, he could tie you up and take you with him, fucking you cross-country. Sharp, erotic images flashed across Sam's mind, and he swayed at the rail.

Mitch gave a dark chuckle. "Don't worry, Sunshine. I'll keep you warm."

"You're serious." Sam was holding so tightly to the rail that his wrists ached. "You're seriously propositioning me."

Mitch grinned, and then he crouched down and braced against the edge of the ramp as he lowered himself to the ground. Sam clung to the rail as the trucker ambled up to the edge of the concrete dock of the pharmacy, tucking his hands into his jean pockets and looking up at Sam. "Come on over and play a bit, Sam." He laughed, wrinkling his nose as he did so. "I got the bat, and you got the ball."

This was insane. "I have a bat too," Sam pointed out.

"That you do, Sunshine, and I would rightly enjoy getting my hands on it." Mitch's eyes were bright blue, Sam could see now, and they burned. "Wouldn't mind a taste of it, either. Wouldn't mind tastin' any part of you."

Maybe it was because he was so close, or maybe it was just that Sam hadn't ever been talked to like this, or maybe, as another queen of drawl would say, it was Memphis. Whatever it was Sam fell victim to it, and it took every last bit of his strength to keep from melting off the loading dock and into Mitch's waiting, able arms. But the promise of sex washed over him, and as if someone had thrown a switch, he calmed, aiming himself with strange serenity toward this new goal. If he was going to do this, he wasn't going to fuck around. Not with safety, anyway.

"Do you have a condom?" he asked. "Lube?"

He liked the way Mitch's blue eyes darkened. "I'm afraid not, Sunshine. But there's plenty of playing to be done with the equipment we bring with us."

"You might not have noticed," Sam said, his voice only breaking a little bit, "but I'm standing at the back of a pharmacy."

Cats with cream didn't have grins like Mitch's. "Of course there's also nothing wrong with being well-supplied. But the question is, if you go back through that door, are you gonna come back out again?"

"With a box of Trojans and a tube of KY in my hand," Sam promised, not so much as batting an eye. In fact, he was looking rather intently at Mitch now. "What about you? Are *you* going to be here when I get back?"

This time there wasn't any smile at all. "Sunshine, if you don't come out in under a minute, I'll be coming in after you."

Sam's heart slammed into his chest and then slithered down into his groin with the rest of his vital functions. "Make it two," he said gruffly. "I think I have to unpack the box."

Chapter 2

SAM found both the condoms and KY in under thirty seconds, but he let himself pause a for a few beats against the shelving to try and calm the nerves which had sprung up the second he was out of Mitch's line of sight. Was he really going to do this? He knew he was, but he felt somehow obligated to at least make a pretense of acknowledging that he shouldn't do this. His heart was pounding in his throat, and his ears were ringing—or, at least, he thought they were until he realized that they were also singing a song, and that was when he remembered the ear buds dangling around his collar. He fumbled in his pocket for the iPhone, stopped the music, locked the screen, and replaced the phone in his pocket again.

He was going to have sex with a stranger. In the alley. While he was on shift. He clutched tighter at the box in his hand. But he was using protection. Surely that counted for something.

Of course, technically, he'd just stolen the condoms.

Aunt Delia would freak if she caught him. She'd fire his ass and kick him out of the house and never pay for another dime of tuition again. Was this worth risking that?

Sam wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brow, taking strange comfort from the feel of cold skin brushing against heated skin. Yeah, it was worth it, because it wasn't like she was ever going to reward him for being good. He thought of all the shit Delia gave him, of her constant criticisms and lists of his sins. *You want sins, Aunt? I'll show you sinning. I'll make the devil weep; I'll sin so bad.*

He straightened, ran a hand through his hair, and opened the door.

Mitch was standing on the other side of it. “Howdy, Sunshine.” He reached out, grabbed Sam’s belt loop, and pulled him forward.

Sam caught the doorknob and pulled it shut behind him. “Hi—” he said, but then he couldn’t say anything else because his mouth was occupied.

Only briefly, though—Mitch bit lightly on his lower lip, ran his tongue across it, and nibbled his way along Sam’s chin to his throat, but it was enough to render Sam speechless and propel him the rest of the way into the other man’s arms. *It’s really happening,* he thought, feeling like an idiot, but he was a giddy idiot. And, apparently, a very easy idiot. When Mitch’s hand ran down his thigh and skirted against his ass, Sam groaned and pushed back against his reach, encouraging bolder groping.

“You change your mind?” Mitch murmured against Sam’s throat as his other hand slid between them to cup Sam’s groin. “You want to give the neighbors a show instead?”

I want you to fuck me on Main Street, Sam wanted to say, ready to strip off his clothes himself. But apparently he still had some part of his brain still functioning, because he said instead, “No. In the trailer, like you said.” He shut his eyes and tilted his head to the side as Mitch trailed his tongue along a muscle in his neck. “*Oh God.*”

“Yeah, but can you walk, Sunshine?” Mitch murmured against his skin. “I think if I let go, you’re gonna fall off the edge. Do I need to carry you?”

“Jesus, that would be so hot,” Sam murmured, not quite aware he was saying the words out loud until the world tilted crazily as he was slung up over Mitch’s shoulder. He had just enough time to register the beautiful sight of the trucker’s ass before he felt everything shift again as Mitch scaled the railing and dropped them both to the ground.

He had one moment of uncertainty when Mitch hauled him off again and tossed him into the trailer. Mitch had tucked the ramp away, and Sam was sitting, ass smarting from impact, on the cold metal floor of the half-empty truck. He was abruptly and acutely aware of the darkness and the closeness of the space, of the smell of cardboard and metal, and of cold. *What am I doing? I’m going to have sex with a*

strange man in the back of a semi? But then Mitch planted his hands on either side of Sam and looked up at him with wicked hunger.

Yes. Yes, I am.

He liked the way Mitch pushed himself up and into the truck and slid Sam farther inside it all at the same time. God, he was *so* strong. Sam had been going to the gym or lifting at home since he was sixteen, but he had nothing, *nothing* on Mitch. Maybe it was girly of him, but he loved the feeling of being so overpowered by another man but of being safe at the same time.

Relatively.

He shut his eyes and let out a half-sigh, half-moan as the weight of Mitch's body pressed against his own. He felt the rigid outline of the other man's cock against his, and he wished there wasn't so much material between them. *There won't be for long*, he realized, and moaned again.

When Mitch withdrew, Sam felt the loss as an ache. He turned his face toward him as Mitch nibbled his way across Sam's cheek. Sam tried to recapture his mouth, and he succeeded long enough to suckle the other man's upper lip and run his tongue across his teeth. He thrilled at the shudder that went through Mitch, but when he let go to plunge deeper, Mitch drew back, rising up above Sam and bracing on one of his arms.

His other hand was fumbling at Sam's jeans, but at his pocket, not his fly. "Something's poking me," he said, "and it ain't cock."

"Oh—that's probably my iPhone." Still breathless, Sam fumbled between them, shifting his hips and unintentionally (but not un-enjoyably) rubbing his erection against Mitch's. He pulled the phone out, flashed it in a quick, "See?" gesture, and tossed it—carefully—aside as Mitch pressed hard against him again.

"If I'd known I was meeting you, Sunshine," he murmured against Sam's throat, "I'd have signed on to pick up a load of mattresses."

Sam arched his back, a move that gave Mitch better access and pressed their sexes even tighter against one another. "I can't believe I'm doing this," he whispered, gasping and clutching at Mitch's shoulders as the trucker suckled his collarbone. "Oh *Jesus.* Oh *God!*"

"This your first time, Sunshine?" Mitch's fingers slid inside Sam's waistband.

"In the back of a semitrailer? Yes." Sam's breath caught, and his stomach went concave as Mitch's fingers played against his abdomen. "And with a total stranger."

"Hey, I told you my name." Mitch slid his hand inside Sam's jeans, teasing the flesh of his hip as his mouth trailed back toward his ear. "You gonna let me fuck you, Sam?"

Sam wanted to point out that he'd been the one to bring the condoms and lube, but hearing "let me fuck you, Sam" out loud was making his brain short-circuit again. Also, speaking of condoms—he flexed his hands, lifted his head with some effort, and tried to glance around. "Shit," he said. When Mitch's hand brushed his cock in the increasingly crowded space inside his jeans, he gasped and fought for coherence. "Wait—*oh God*—lost the condoms!"

"Relax, Sunshine. You dropped them on the dock, but I picked them up after I took us over the railing." He removed his hand from Sam's jeans, but only to facilitate his undoing of Sam's fly. "Let me fuck you, Sam."

Sam would have been hard-pressed to answer such a plea under any circumstances, but the fact that Mitch was pulling his aching cock out of his underwear as he asked pretty much guaranteed Sam was only going to be able to gurgle his reply. In the end he had to answer by thrusting his hips eagerly into Mitch's hand. It was apparently enough for Mitch, who stopped talking and started working his way down Sam's body. He left briefly, and then he was back with darkness in his wake as the doors to the trailer swung shut to a crack behind them, allowing a single shaft of light to guide Mitch back to Sam.

The last bits of insecurity about what he had committed himself to fled Sam when Mitch's mouth closed around his cock. Darin's blow jobs, infrequent and inexpert as they were, would be intolerable after this. Mitch sucked him hard, taking him in deep, his tongue snaking around Sam's shaft before he opened his throat and took him all the way in, until he was burrowing his nose in Sam's pubic hair. Sam cried out and clutched at his head, his own exploding as Mitch began to move up and down along the length of his sex. His hips moved tentatively, trying to match the other man's rhythm, but just when he

thought he'd found it, Mitch released him and sucked on his balls instead.

Sam opened his eyes, lifted his head, and looked just in time to watch a testicle slide from Mitch's mouth as he moved to take Sam's shaft in again. Mitch was cast in shadow, and Sam couldn't see the details, so when the hot, wet tongue ran up the length of him, Sam gasped and groaned as it pressed insistently into his slit. Then Mitch swallowed him again, taking him once more to the root, and this time Sam just lay back, gave in, and fucked the other man's mouth.

He came with almost no warning, and he felt as if he were emptying the entire contents of his body into Mitch's mouth. He was trembling in some sort of post-orgasmic convulsion, and he was grateful for it, because he was sure it was the only movement he swore he was ever going to be able to make again. He was completely, utterly spent.

But they weren't even close to done.

When Mitch rose over him, pulled him into a sitting position, and turned him over, propping him onto his hands and knees, Sam went like a rag doll, content to let himself be positioned in whatever way Mitch wanted him. This ended up being on his knees, his jeans and underwear bunched beneath to cushion him against the cold, hard floor. When Mitch bent him forward over a box just big enough for Sam to clutch, Sam's cock was still at full mast, still hot and humming from release. His ass was bare, exposed, and prickling from the cold.

And then, with no warning at all, it was gripped by two large, rough hands. Sam shut his eyes and eased against the box as he felt himself opened and exposed. His eyes opened again, wide, as he felt something soft and wet slide against his entrance.

Tongue. That soft and wet was Mitch's *tongue.*

He collapsed again and gave in to the moan that seemed to come from the bottom of his balls as Mitch spread his cheeks a little wider and went at Sam's ass with vigor. *Inside.* His tongue was *inside*. He'd read about this. He'd watched it in teasing bits of free clips online. He'd *dreamed* of this. And now it was happening. He was being rimmed by a hot, sexy stranger in the back of a semitrailer. He moaned louder and spread his knees farther apart as he lifted off the floor,

trying desperately to press his ass tighter against Mitch's face, to take him deeper and deeper inside.

He was gasping when Mitch finally stopped, but it was only seconds before tongue was replaced with a fat index finger slicked with lube.

"You are one sexy little piece of ass," Mitch whispered, as one hand pulled Sam open wider and the other made its first foray inside. "You gonna moan like that when it's my cock inside you?" He added a second finger, and Sam grunted, pressing back to meet its thrust. Mitch laughed, the sound low and dangerous and sexy as fuck. "Oh yeah, honey. You are a *hot* little fuck." He added a third finger and pushed hard as he pressed his body against Sam's back and whispered into his ear. "How rough do you want it, Sunshine? Hard and fast, or slow and easy?"

Sam's eyes were rolling back inside his head. Oh shit, but he wanted it hard enough to send him into the next county. But he remembered that time Darin had torn him, and how fucking much that had hurt later, and the memory was enough to bring him back to earth. He pushed off the box enough to reach behind him and fumble with the front of Mitch's fly, pausing occasionally to lose himself in the way Mitch was now rubbing insistently against his prostate. But he kept up his exploration until he had Mitch's cock in his hand. He measured it carefully, and with some relief. He was almost alarmingly long, but not half as thick as Darin.

"Start slow," Sam instructed. "But—if you can, later—"

Mitch twisted his fingers inside of Sam's ass, and he gasped.

"Pound the shit out of you?" Mitch finished for him. Sam grunted as Mitch's fingers curled, and Sam nodded—Mitch's fingers pulled out immediately, and Sam fell forward, trembling, back against his box.

He braced and sweated despite the cold as he listened to the crinkle of foil as Mitch unwrapped the condom, but as soon as he felt the first nudge, he relaxed again, opening himself as much as he could as Mitch began to enter him. It felt different than his fumbling forays with Darin, and not just because it was a different penis. Mitch was slow and deliberate where Darin was brutal and thrusting. He waited without being told until Sam was able to relax his sphincter, but even once he was past that barrier, he slid still slower and slower, measuring

his advance against Sam's gasps and grunts and his eventual push back for more.

He was so careful that Sam forgot himself, forgot everything in the world except for taking this cock as deeply inside his body as he could. Mitch seemed to have turned into some sort of garden hose, he was so damned long, and Sam had visions of his cock sliding all the way inside him into his belly. But after what seemed like an hour, he felt the press of Mitch's hips against his bare cheeks, and he was inside.

It felt amazing. Sam felt stuffed full, but not uncomfortably so, nor painfully. He shut his eyes and sank into the sensation, uncaring of the chill air, untroubled by the hard pressure against his knees. *So good.* The world was so good with Mitch inside of him like this—he didn't know if it was Mitch himself or just someone who actually knew how to fuck, but he didn't care. He'd never felt like this, ever, and he never wanted it to end. The whole world melted away, and in that moment, he didn't care about his aunt, or school, or being a loser, or anything at all. He'd steal a thousand condoms, a trailer-full of lube, just to feel this full, this good, even for five minutes. It was wonderful. It was amazing. It was *perfect.*

And then Mitch began to move, and perfect gave way to a sensation that could not be described with mere words.

Slippery. Hot. Wet. And *tight,* oh *God,* so tight. Sam bent himself farther over the box, opening his mouth and biting hard against the edge as he felt the shudder of Mitch's movement all the way in the back of his teeth. The best was when he slid all the way in, his penis sliding over Sam's prostate. It was like running electricity over his veins or pumping liquid nitrogen into his system, and it came over and over and over again. His own cock was rock-hard again, and he was moaning, too, soft, breathy gasps each time Mitch slid inside him.

"How you doin', Sunshine?" Mitch's question was a guttural growl, and it was punctuated with a hard squeeze against the flesh of his ass. "You ready for something with a little more kick?" When Sam grunted and nodded his assent, Mitch pulled back, and Sam readied himself for a more aggressive assault.

But instead, Mitch pulled out entirely, and didn't immediately return. When Sam recovered enough to glance over his shoulder, it was in time to see Mitch finish peeling off his button-down and balling the

shirt into a makeshift pillow before bending down and nudging it against Sam's knees. "Up, Sunshine," he murmured, sliding his palm gently over Sam's bare ass. "I don't want you to remember this by thinking how badly it fucked over your knees."

The gesture touched Sam, making him feel soft inside as he lifted one knee and then the other, letting Mitch prop him onto the shirt to his satisfaction. *So much better than a pizza box.* When he finished and took Sam into his arms, Sam closed his eyes and leaned back against Mitch's chest. He let his mouth fall open as Mitch pushed inside of him again, and then, on an impulse that seemed to come from the bottom of his soul, he turned his face toward Mitch and captured his mouth. He felt Mitch's surprise, and the saucy trucker turned almost shy, his tongue darting out tentatively to taste Sam's own. When Sam would have deepened the kiss, he broke away, trailing open-mouthed to Sam's ear, where he nuzzled along the edge before biting lightly against the lobe.

"I'm gonna fuck you now, Sam," he whispered. "You ready?"

"Yes," Sam whispered, reaching back to clutch at him wherever he could find purchase. "Oh God—fuck me, Mitch."

"Hard, Sunshine?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah."

Mitch brushed his lips against Sam's cheek. "Then bend over, baby, and hold on."

It was a slow re-entry, but once Mitch had pushed deep again, slow was over. He pulled back, almost exiting, and then he pounded Sam, pushing deep and hard and fast, slamming Sam into the box and forcing the air from his body. The trailer filled with the *slap, slap, slap* of flesh on flesh, a sound both jarring and soothing to Sam at once.

This was sex. This was what he had fumbled for in the dark, what he'd sought in his own fantasies and the fantasies of others—this, this pounding, searing, almost brutal claiming. Sam surrendered to it, feeling as if he had been waiting his whole life to find this kind of release.

And then it shifted yet again. Barely pausing, Mitch reached around Sam, sliding one hand beneath him to cradle his stomach and the other around the front of his shoulders. Mitch resumed his thrusts, but now he cradled Sam against him, holding him up and pressing him

down at the same time. Sam felt dizzy at the switch, and he struggled to find the sense of liberation back again. His breathing grew labored, and he clutched at the box as he tried to find his exhilaration back.

He felt a brush across the back of his neck, once, and the second time it held. His skin prickled at the tickle of stubble and tingled at the soft, damp press of lips. When Mitch's mouth opened, Sam shuddered first at the brush of Mitch's breath and then at the swipe of his tongue. And with that last gesture, he found the place he sought once more.

Sam shut his eyes. He braced with one arm against the box and reached around with the other to pull Mitch's head back to his neck, begging silently for him to maintain the contact. Each breath, each lick, each nibble of teeth and scrape of beard took him higher, sent him deeper into that pool of safety, a place where nothing could reach him, nothing but sex, and now, because of this embrace, and this strange backward kiss, Mitch. Though he had already spent himself, he felt another pulse rising inside him. With a growl, a bite at the back of Sam's neck, and one last hard thrust, Mitch came inside him, and as if propelled by the act, Sam followed suit against the side of the box. They collapsed together, breathing hard, their chests rising and falling and pressing back-to-front and front-to-box, quietly echoing their joining. And then, with reluctance, Mitch pulled away, running his hand down Sam's back as he rose.

Sam remained where he was, his body still humming, his mind still high on euphoria.

Another stroke, this one across the trembling flesh of his backside. "You okay?"

Sam tried to nod, but it was so much work. *I'm fantastic,* he wanted to say, but all he could manage was a garbled, "Good."

He heard Mitch laugh, quietly, and the sound made Sam want to purr and climb into his lap. He tried to move, to do this, but all he could manage was to roll off the box. He landed on his ass, which, well-used as it was, tingled at the contact of the cold metal floor. Sam let his head loll against his own arm, but he rolled his face toward Mitch and smiled a sleepy, sated smile.

Mitch grinned back and reached out to tweak the toe of his tennis shoe. "Much to my regret, Sam, I gotta get on the road. I have to get to

Minneapolis by eight, and while you were worth it, I can't afford to be too late."

The reminder of obligation dulled Sam's glow, but only around the edges. "I should get back to work too." He bit his lip, pushed aside his insecurity, and said what was on his mind. "Thank you, Mitch. That was—I don't know. *Amazing.*"

"Sunshine," Mitch drawled, "that was your performance, not mine."

"No. I'm never like that. Just with you, I guess." The confession felt too bald, and Sam climbed weakly to his knees and wrestled with his pants. "I mean—God, after that, I don't know how I'm ever going to have sex again. Nothing's going to measure up."

This confession felt even more awkward, and Sam glanced at Mitch to see if he found this funny, but Mitch had already refastened his own clothes and was sitting in a crouch near the open door. *Waiting to leave.* Sam felt a pang at the upcoming loss because he realized, as he sat there staring at the man in the darkness who had shown him the way to great sex, that he was never going to see Mitch again. And it was a stupid, silly thing to think, but he realized in that moment that he was going to miss the man more than he missed the sex.

Sam opened his mouth to try and find the way to say this, even part of this, but he gave up and simply reached for Mitch.

"Sam?"

His heart slammed into his throat and then sank down to the bottom of his stomach. *Aunt Delia.*

Mitch was watching him carefully now. "Your boss?" he whispered.

"Worse," Sam whispered back. "My aunt."

"What's the lie we're going with?" He stood and put his hand on the door. "Have I seen you run down the alley, or do I not know what the hell she's talking about?"

"You haven't seen me," Sam said, curling his knees to his chest and waiting as Mitch climbed back out of the truck.

What was he going to do if she caught him? He knew she was looking for a way to get out of paying for him, and now that he was a legal adult, all she needed was an excuse to give her friends as to why.

Fucking the delivery man in the back of his trailer while on the job was a pretty damn good excuse, and he'd just handed it to her on a platter.

But what scared him more than anything was the realization that he didn't care. In fact he almost wanted to get caught, because then it would be out of his hands, and he'd be free.

Jesus, was he *that* fucked up?

Mitch reappeared at the back and helped himself in again. "She's gone."

Sam climbed to his feet, but his legs were shaky. He half-walked, half-stumbled to Mitch, so focused on getting back into the storeroom that he almost jumped down without saying anything else. But he caught himself in time, put his hand on Mitch's arm, and looked up at his face in the late afternoon light.

What was he supposed to say? Thank you? Before he could think of anything, he heard Delia calling his name again from inside, and he decided that maybe silence was best. He put his hand on Mitch's chest, stood on tiptoe to kiss him gently on the mouth, then jumped down from the trailer and scrambled back up onto the dock. He lingered, just a moment, watching as Mitch locked the doors. When the trucker smiled and winked at him, Sam waved, pushing aside a foolish sense of loss. Then, as Mitch headed back to the cab of the semi, Sam opened the door and slipped as quietly as he could inside the pharmacy.

Emma was walking into the storeroom as he entered. "There you are! Hey—"

Sam shushed her desperately, grabbed her arm, and dragged her off into the back shelving. "Oh God—don't. Don't say anything."

Emma wrinkled her nose. "Sam, you smell like sex." Her eyes widened. "*Oh. My. God.* You got Keith to fuck you? And you did it *here*?"

"No! Not Keith—" He heard the door open, and he clutched Emma's arm so tightly that his fingers hurt.

"Sam?" Delia called from the door. "Emma? Sam?"

"*Who were you with?*" Emma hissed.

"Emma, she'll fire me!"

"Sam?" Delia called again.

Emma raised an eyebrow. "*Who?*"

"A delivery man," Sam whispered, realizing she was in the sort of mood to dangle him over the cliff to find out what she wanted. "In the back of his trailer. *Now please, Em!*"

"Hard-core!" Emma said, giving him a thumbs-up.

"What am I going to say to Delia?" he asked, desperate.

"Relax. I got it. He's back here, Delia." Emma waved an irritated hand at Sam as he began to whimper. "He was way in the back with his headphones on so loud he couldn't hear us."

It was a good excuse. It was a *great* excuse. But the second she said "headphones," Sam paled, and his stomach lurched, and without caring what the hell Delia thought or said, he dashed back through the shelves and out the door, but by the time he got to the loading dock, the semi was already pulling back out onto the street.

"Oh *shit!*" Sam sank down to his knees. "I forgot my iPhone!"

LATER that night, after a grueling shakedown from Delia and an excruciating shift of inventory, Sam sank into the sugar-pink softness that was Emma's bed, hugged a lace-lined heart pillow to his chest, and curled into a fetal position as Emma tried to force a flask of vodka into his hand.

"It could still work out. You could get one of the smaller ones, since they're so cheap, and replace it. Or maybe he'll call and offer to return it. I know how you are—you already have it programmed with half the Middleton phone book."

Sam pushed back against the flask with the back of his hand. "I just want to lie here awhile, and then I'll go home."

Emma flopped down onto the bed beside him with a sigh. She rested her forehead against his and reached over to stroke his hair. "I hate it when you're like this."

Sam shut his eyes and let the touch soothe him a little. "I was so stupid, Em. I *am* so stupid." He paused, wallowing in his worthlessness, but she kept stroking, and it all just tumbled out. "It isn't just the iPhone. I don't know what it is. I just feel like an idiot."

“Was the sex that bad?”

Sam’s eyes had fallen shut as soon as she started stroking, which only made it all the easier to replay the scene inside the trailer against the back of his eyelids. “No. It wasn’t bad.”

“Then why—?”

“Because I shouldn’t have done it. Because it was a huge, stupid risk. Because I was so stupid that I lost my brand new iPhone I saved forever to get.” He buried his face into the pillow and shuddered as he sighed. “Oh, Em. I’m such an idiot. I don’t even care. I know it’s not real, but I don’t care. I still want it.”

Her fingers stilled, and her voice lost its soothing softness. “Babe, you’ve lost me.”

“Being with him. With anybody, like that.” He hugged the pillow tighter to his chest. “He was just so… different. Amazing. It was like I was being set free.”

“Babe, that’s called *good sex*. You’ve been settling for the freaks and losers far too long.”

Sam knew he couldn’t really argue against her because what she said was logical, but at the same time, he knew that it wasn’t just good sex. It was something about Mitch himself. He just couldn’t explain why. Or maybe it wasn’t just Mitch and he was delusional. How was he supposed to know? Confusion tangled with guilt, making his stomach sick and his head sore.

“I shouldn’t have done it, not like that, not while I was supposed to be working, and not with somebody I didn’t even know. Not in the back of a trailer. I’m supposed to be focusing on school and working hard so I can get out of Delia’s basement. I shouldn’t have done that. But I don’t care that I shouldn’t have done it,” Sam whispered. “I want to do it again.” *With him.*

“Hon, it was a fling.” Em went back to stroking his hair. “It’s supposed to be fun, not eat you up inside.”

“I know.” Sam tightened further into a ball. “It’s because I’m *so stupid.*”

That earned him a slap on his backside. “You aren’t stupid, you idiot.”

"I just feel so… *lousy*. I can't make it make sense, Em. It all happened so fast. And then… now… I don't know. I just want to go to bed and forget about it."

She kissed the top of his head—another way to make him melt. "Stay here, then, for tonight. You know my parents don't care."

Part of Sam wanted to refuse this, too, preferring to sulk in the privacy of his own bedroom, but there was too great a risk that his aunt would come down to pick a fight with him. She still suspected he'd been doing "something fishy" at work, and since he had been, there was a danger when he was in this sort of mood he might actually tell her. So he stayed.

He hadn't "slept over" at Em's for a long time, not since those dark days just after his mom's death. She curled around him tonight as she had back then, pressing her soft breasts against his back and burrowing her face in his neck, sliding her leg between his. It probably looked erotic as hell, but to Sam, it just felt soft and sweet. He liked feeling Em's breath on the back of his neck. He even liked the breasts, which was something he didn't say very often. They were like soft little pillows between their two bodies, and in stark contrast to what they were to most men who got Em into bed (never this bed, though—her mom would freak), they diffused any tentative threats of sexuality between them, at least for Sam. If she found their snuggles erotic, he just hoped she never told him about it.

She got him up in the morning, too, and fed and dressed him. She'd put him in a pair of her sweatpants and an old T-shirt overnight, and to his embarrassment, he found Emma's mother had washed his clothes for him. He put them on, ate the bowl of cereal Emma had set out for him, and played nice with the parents as they asked about work, and school, and his summer plans.

"So what's the status on the apartment?" Emma's mother asked, smiling at Sam. "I assume Emma has you roped into her scheme, as usual?"

"Temporary setback," Emma declared as she tore into her toast. "By this time in August, Mom, you can turn my bedroom into your scrapbook room."

"It's a lot of money," Mrs. Day replied, her voice a warning, but it was a gentle one. Sam watched her face as she and Emma continued

to spar, and it made his chest hurt. That was how his mom had argued with him, and he missed it. It wasn't fighting; it was verbal jousting, and beneath the tussle, you could feel the love.

He thought of the cold reception that would be waiting for him back at Cherry Hill, and he looked down into his bowl of Cheerios, poking the oat circles beneath the milk as he blinked rapidly and scolded himself for his self-pity.

Once he was done eating he had to go to work, but Delia was out for the day, so he spent a very pleasant morning and early afternoon counting out pills and pasting on prescription labels. Even better than a shift without Delia was going home to find the house empty and a note saying that she and Uncle Norm had gone with the Baumgartens to dinner and a movie and that she expected to see the dishes done and the carpet vacuumed when she came home.

Sam grinned. He did the dishes and carpets as directed. Then he grabbed his keys, headed back to his car, and went to the store.

When he came home he was laden with a bottle of San Pellegrino, a bag of frozen pot stickers, and a bag of Newman's chocolate alphabet cookies. He cooked the pot stickers on the stove, did up his dishes, and took his portable feast to the den. After nipping downstairs to fetch his VCR tape full of episodes of *Dancing with the Stars*, he tucked it into his aunt's player, grabbed the remote, and settled deep into the crevice of the couch. (Uncle Norm had a state-of-the-art DVR, of course, but there was no way Delia would let him "fill it up with trash" like *Dancing with the Stars*.)

He'd eaten two pot stickers and had a flutter over Giles Marini as he drew his partner close at the end of a tango when the phone rang. He groaned and almost let it go, but he realized that without his cell phone, his aunt and uncle's phone was now his phone too. *Maybe it's Mitch*, his traitorous heart whispered hopefully, which was why Sam tensed and avoided looking at the caller ID as he picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Do I need to come over with the vodka?" Emma asked when he answered. "Or are you better now?"

Sam felt even more ridiculous at his disappointment. "I'm fine. Delia and Norm are out, so I'm watching TV upstairs and eating pot stickers."

"What are you watching? Maybe I'll come over."

"*Dancing with the Stars*," Sam said dreamily.

Emma groaned. "I'm not coming over. Do you want to meet up later, though? Maybe go out?"

Sam considered his wallet. He thought he might have a dollar, and it was a week until payday. "No, I'll just stay in. I should study."

"You aren't going to study," she pointed out.

"Okay, I won't study. But I really do want to stay in."

"Are you pouting?" she asked with no empathy.

Sam sighed. "I am not pouting. I'm trying to watch quality programming. I have two week's worth of the show to get through." He gentled. "I'm fine, Em. I really am."

"All right," she said, sounding unconvinced. "But if you change your mind, call me back."

"I will," Sam promised.

He hung up the phone and restarted his show.

Not even two minutes later, the phone rang again. He stopped the show, picked up the phone, and glared as he saw the ID.

"What?" he demanded.

"I just remembered," Emma said, unaffected by his tone. "It's margarita night at Los Dos. Pick me up in an hour, and I'll take you—my treat."

"What is this determination to liquor me up?" Sam asked, genuinely bewildered.

"You need some release," Emma said firmly.

Sam did a quick flashback to the trailer, feeling both a hum and a pang. "I've been released. Trust me."

"Not sex, you nimwit. Energy release. You need to cleanse your aura."

"With two-for-one margaritas?" Sam let his head fall back on the couch and shook his head at the ceiling. "Emma, go get laid. Please."

She sighed. "I can't. Steve isn't interested." That was the part-time pharmacist Norm had hired, who was very hot, but so straight you could use him for a unit of measure. "I all but jumped him earlier

tonight, and he actually recoiled. Come on, hon. We both need to get out. I'm worried about you, Sam."

"I'd be fine if you'd just let me eat my dinner and watch my show," Sam shot back, and then he hung up on her.

When the phone rang a third time, he was seriously pissed off.

"I told you," he said as he lifted the phone to his ear, "to go and get laid."

"I will take that under advisement," a low, sexy, and amused drawl purred into his ear. "Did you have anyone in mind, Sunshine?"

Sam dropped his forkful of pot sticker and forgot, briefly, how to breathe. "Mitch?" he whispered before his throat closed again.

"Hello, Sam," Mitch said. "Are you, by any chance, missing a phone?"

Chapter 3

FOR several seconds, Sam could do nothing but open and close his mouth like a fish.

“Sam?” Mitch called again, more concerned and less amused.

“Sorry,” Sam replied, a little breathless. “I just—how did you get this number?”

“It’s on your phone. I tried the one listed ‘work’, but I got a machine. It said ‘Biehl’, though, in the name, and this was a Biehl number, so I took a chance. Thought I’d get your boss, though, and not you.”

“It’s my aunt and uncle’s pharmacy,” Sam explained, his heart hammering a bit less urgently in his chest. “I live in their basement. Just for now,” he said quickly, afraid he sounded pathetic. “Until I finish college.”

“I take it you made it back inside without our little adventure being discovered?”

“Mostly,” Sam admitted.

“Good.” The pitch of Mitch’s voice lowered. “That was a right pleasant buzz you gave me, Sunshine, all the way to Minneapolis.”

Sam’s face turned hot. “Oh?”

“Oh yes,” Mitch drawled.

Sam reached for the Pellegrino and took a big swig, not knowing what else to say. He wondered why he didn’t feel better that he was getting his iPhone back. He wasn’t feeling much, actually—maybe he

was in shock. He felt, actually, drunk. He eyed the bottle suspiciously, momentarily wondering if he'd grabbed vodka after all. But no. It was just mineral water. It was Mitch making Sam feel woozy and weird.

The silence was stretching, making Sam feel uncomfortable. He cleared his throat so his voice wouldn't break. "Where are you? Back in town?"

Mitch grunted. "I'm fifty-five miles from the middle of fucking nowhere, trapped in a stinking hole of a truck stop full of greasy old men drooling over magazines full of women with plastic tits while it rains like crazy outside. That's where I am."

Sam laughed, the image horribly clear in his mind. "Sorry to hear that."

"Me too." He sighed. "So, what are you doing home on a Saturday night, Sunshine?"

Sam glanced at the TV, where Giles and his partner were frozen mid-dip. "Eating. Watching a show."

"Not out with—who was it? Darin?" Mitch asked.

Sam went very still. "How do you know about Darin?"

"He keeps texting you, wanting to know why you aren't coming over. I can assure you that he has lube this time, and the last text promised that he cleaned up his apartment and bought beer. He's also apparently very fond of the way your ass looks when it opens up. I have to say, I agree."

"Oh God." Sam shut his eyes and sank into the couch. He'd forgotten Darin entirely in the drama of Mitch and his phone. And now Mitch was reading Darin's X-rated texts? "Oh *God.*"

Mitch laughed. "Sorry, Sunshine. They keep popping up, and I don't know how to turn them off. It took me ten minutes to unlock the screen."

"Look," Sam said, feeling sick. "Darin isn't—Darin is—" He rubbed the side of his face, groaning inwardly. "Darin is a mistake."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that." Mitch sounded unconcerned. "Though I admit I am curious to hear why he mentioned still having plenty of empty pizza boxes."

“So why are you fifty-five miles from the middle of nowhere?” Sam asked, redirecting the conversation.

“Stuck by a storm,” Mitch said, irritated. “Heading to Milwaukee, but I’m going to be late. It’s severe weather all the way across, and I have to cover a few dicey roads. But it works out, because then I was free to try and hunt you down.”

Sam put his plate on the coffee table. “Can you enjoy the night off, at least?”

“Not here. There was one guy eyeballing me, but I couldn’t tell if he wanted to fuck me or punch me, and I’m not interested in either with him. But I am enjoying talking with you, Sunshine. So tell me, college boy: what are you studying?”

“Nursing.” Sam braced for the jokes.

Mitch didn’t joke, but he did whistle in approval. “Tough stuff. Good career, though. They will always need nurses.”

“I want to do RN,” Sam admitted. “I want to work in a clinic. But it’s longer for that degree, which means more money, and harder classes. This semester is pretty tough, actually. I need to buckle down more, or I’m not going to pass.”

“You seem like a smart one. I bet you’ll pass just fine.”

The conversation lulled again. Sam dwelt on the weirdness of the entire experience, still not quite understanding how or why he was conversing so casually with Mitch. He honestly hadn’t expected him to return the iPhone. He figured it would just get lost, or he’d toss it aside. It made him feel kind of flattered that Mitch would take the time to try to hunt him down.

It’s just to return your phone, he scolded himself. *Don’t get any stupid ideas.*

“Do you know something, Sam?” Mitch said, his voice very low.

“What?” Sam said back, just as quietly.

Mitch’s voice went even lower. “If I close my eyes, I can still taste you.”

The words hit Sam in the center of his chest. He said nothing, but he was breathing harder.

"I see you too," Mitch said, so soft Sam had to strain to hear. "Such a pretty, pink hole. Honey, I wish I could have taken an hour at that ass."

"*Hhhuh,*" Sam said, the sound more a whisper of air than a word. He was turned on but nervous too. Mitch was hundreds of miles away, but Sam felt suddenly exposed, and unsafe. He reached for a pillow from the other end of the couch and crushed it against his chest.

"You liked that, too, didn't you," Mitch went on. "Sweet Jesus, the sounds you made. Just thinking about the way you moaned makes me hard. Was I the first one to rim you, Sunshine?"

"No—I mean—" Sam stammered. He was, but he didn't want Mitch to think he was some virgin. "Yes, but—" He remembered the way it had felt, and he lost it again. "The—the tongue—that—*oh God.*"

"Nobody ever tongue-fucked you? That what you're trying to say, shy honey?"

Sam swallowed. The sound was audible enough Mitch probably heard it. "No," he confessed.

"Such a shame. I've never seen somebody so turned on. You need that done to you twice a day, I'm thinking." Mitch's voice dropped to a whisper. "Wish I were there to do it right now. I'd turn you over, spread those cheeks—" He made a long, agonized sort of groan, like a man imagining a forbidden pleasure. "And because I'd have time, I'd just sit there a minute and talk dirty to it, because you'd moan and squirm while I did, and your ass would pucker, and I'd just stare at it, watching it wink."

"*Nghyh!*" Sam was gripping the phone and the pillow so hard he thought he might crush the first and tear the latter. He glanced around the room in sudden terror, as if his aunt and uncle might appear at any moment and catch him listening to someone talking dirty at him.

"And then I would lick it, Sam. I would lick your hot little hole until you were pushing back against me, like you were in the trailer, and then, *then,* baby, I would spread you wider and push my tongue inside you. Way in, honey. Maybe you didn't know, but my lips were sucking against your skin the other day, and I was licking you as high up as I could. I just licked you and fucked you, sweet thing, harder and deeper until I couldn't make it any harder or deeper, and then I just listened to you sing. Like you are right now. Only a lot, lot louder."

Sam *was* moaning, just a little, and he realized his hips were moving too. His cock had been hard since Mitch had said, "taste you," and his body was remembering again. He could *feel* that tongue inside him.

"You wish I was there to put my tongue inside you, Sam?" Mitch whispered, his voice so rough it was practically gravel. "Are you thinking about my tongue fucking your ass right now?"

"Yes." Sam turned to his side, doubling over, clutching the pillow to his chest, imagining Mitch behind him, his hands spreading Sam wide, just like he said.

"Are you home alone, Sam?"

For a moment he panicked, but then he remembered Mitch was many miles away. Then he remembered that he'd actually rather he *were* in the room with Mitch. "Yes."

"I want you to take your pants off, Sam."

Sam hissed. "I can't—!"

"Take them off," Mitch said again with some force. "Nobody's there to see you, and I can't do it myself. Take them off. Take off your pants. Put down the phone if you have to, get rid of everything south of your belly button, and let me know when you're done."

"I can't," Sam said again, panicking. "They might come home!"

"You got a bedroom, right? Go to it, Sam. Go to your room, take off your pants, and bend over. *Do it*."

Sam was doing it. He couldn't believe he was doing it, but he was doing it. He stood, all but stumbled to the basement, and locked the door behind him once he was inside his room. He put the phone down on his bed. He stood up, almost falling over, he was so nervous, but he managed to remain standing long enough to undo his button and his zipper. And then he was taking off his jeans, using both hands to shove them down, all the way down. He fell back against the bed and kicked his jeans off, and then his underwear. Then he took off his socks, because he felt ridiculous with them on. Above him, the TV had bailed on the VCR, and some woman was cheerfully attempting to sell him dish detergent. Sam let his head fall back against the bed with a shaky sigh as he picked up the phone once more.

"D-done," he said.

“Bend over the bed. Kneel on the floor and aim your bare ass at the wall.”

Sam did this too. He didn’t know why. He felt disconnected, floating, almost. But he did it. He knelt on the floor and put his head down on the mattress, tucking his chin into his chest so he could breathe. He put the phone back to his ear and made a soft, desperate sound into the receiver.

“Suck on your finger,” Mitch whispered. “Make it really wet, Sam, and then put it in your ass. Push it way, way, in, as slowly as you can.”

Sam’s hand was shaking as he fumbled to put his finger in his mouth. Which one? Middle? Index? He sucked both. He had never done this. He didn’t understand how he was going to do this now. He felt ridiculous, embarrassed, and very, very nervous, as if a film crew would burst in at any minute, ready to announce on the evening news that at 9 p.m. Samuel Daniel Keller of Middleton, Iowa, knelt beside his bed and stuck his own finger in his ass.

“Suck really hard,” Mitch said. “Really wet. Really wet, baby. Dripping. Yeah. I can hear you. Do it harder. *Harder*. Yeah, honey. *Yeah*.” Sam was in a trance, the whole world gone except for Mitch’s voice in his ear. “Now reach behind you,” Mitch said, and Sam did. *Oh, like this,* he thought, and touched a finger against himself.

“*Ahhh!*” he gasped.

“*Yes,*” Mitch growled. “Push it in. Push it in *deep*. Moan for me, Sam. Let me hear you sing again.”

Mitch’s instructions became a low, lewd litany, and Sam did everything he said. He listened to every dirty word, did everything Mitch told him to do, and above all, he made noise, because that was what Mitch wanted. He forgot about his aunt and uncle possibly coming home at any minute, and he let go. He gasped. He cried out. He moaned. He felt like an animal. He *was* an animal. He fucked himself with his finger, first one, then two, and he humped his bed, all the while with the phone to his ear, grunting out his pleasure to a man many, many miles away, a man whom he had let fuck him against a box, a man who had made him feel slutty, wonderful and sexy and then miserable, frightened, and shamed, and now here he was, fucking himself so that man could listen.

“You’re so hot, Sunshine,” Mitch whispered, his breathing coming fast too. “God, I wish I could see you. I wish I could taste you. I wish that was my tongue inside you, or my fingers, or my cock. I wish those were my fingers, and I wish my mouth was on your cock, sucking you so hard, letting you fuck my mouth, moaning with you, waiting to drink you when you came. I wish I were fucking you, Sam. I wish I were there fucking you right now. Fuck yourself for me, Sunshine. Fuck yourself really fucking hard.”

“*Ohmygod*,” Sam gasped, his voice low and almost gurgling. He didn’t even sound like himself. “Oh my God, I’m gonna come!”

“Do it,” Mitch whispered. “Come for me, Sam. Come hard, and be loud. Be really, really loud. I’m underneath you, Sam, sucking you. Come in my mouth. Fuck my mouth, Sam. Fuck my mouth. Fuck me. Fuck me, Sam. *Fuck me.*”

Sam had felt the orgasm building, but when Mitch started growling, “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,” it snapped, swamping him like a wave. He shouted, *very* loudly, so loud he hurt his own ears. He shouted again, his orgasm kicking at his teeth, and then he groaned as he felt his semen pouring out of him in ropes. He shuddered, once, twice, three times, then sagged against the side of the bed as Mitch whispered soothing approval at him.

“That was so good, Sam—oh my fucking God, that was so good.” His voice was shaking. “Sweet Christ, I’ve never been so blue-balled. I just about came right here. Boy would that have been something.”

Sam could barely move, and his brain was still drifting somewhere above his head, but the “right here” comment snagged him back down. “Where are you?”

“I told you—in the truck stop.”

Sam’s eyes opened. “*In* the truck stop? You aren’t in your truck? You’re—you’re out in the *open*?”

Mitch laughed, wickedly. “Don’t worry, hon. You’re not the one sitting in a booth with your dick threatening to bust open your pants. That’s me.”

“But—people are there!”

"Yeah. A bunch of dirty old men drooling at videos of women young enough to be their daughters getting cum sprayed over their faces. This isn't exactly the Ritz."

Sam let his hip fall sideways until he was sitting on the floor. He caught sight of the mess he'd made on the mattress and winced before letting the side of his head fall against the bed. "Do you do this a lot? Talk dirty to people on the phone?"

He'd meant it as a casual comment, almost a tease, a release of his own shock at his behavior. But the tenor of the silence that came after made him uneasy.

"Sorry," Sam said. "I didn't mean—"

"I used to," Mitch replied. Gone was the teasing. Now *he* sounded guilty. "I used to do a lot of things like that, but I haven't in awhile."

But you did with me. Am I special? Sam shook his head at his own idiocy. Yeah, he was so special that Mitch wanted him to stick his fingers in his ass and hump his bed. "I'm so stupid," he whispered.

"You aren't stupid," Mitch said gently. "Just never mind me. You're—you're a good kid, Sam."

God, he'd rather be stupid! "I'm not a kid," Sam shot back. "I'm twenty-one."

"I'm not," Mitch drawled. "I'm an old, jaded man." He sighed. "You just remind me of someone I used to know, is all. Kind of makes me feel funny."

There was no justification for the jealousy Sam felt, but that didn't make it go away. "Some other 'kid'?" he asked, testy.

"Nope. He's an old man now too." He sighed. "Old Man Trouble, determined to take me to hell with him. Anyway, don't listen to me. You're sweet, Sunshine. Sweet and sexy."

Sam felt warm, and pleased, and in that moment, not guilty at all. "Thanks," he said shyly. "You're not bad yourself."

There was a pause, but it wasn't awkward this time. Just nice.

Mitch cleared his throat. "I would mail you this phone thing, Sunshine," he said, all business again, "but I'm afraid it wouldn't make it. I'll be through Iowa again in a week. Can I see you then? Bring you your phone? Take you to dinner?"

Dinner. A date. Sam's stomach was immediately full of butterflies. "Okay."

"A late dinner, probably. I'll get to Middleton Wednesday. That work?"

Sam felt dizzy. And elated. "Yes."

"Good. Where and when am I meeting you?"

Sam tried to think quickly. He remembered his earlier conversation with Emma and seized on the idea. "Los Dos Amigos. It's Mexican. Do you need directions?"

"I can find it. Time, Sunshine?"

Sam mentally ran through his Wednesday schedule. "Eight?"

"Eight it is. See you then. And don't string poor Darin out too long."

He hung up.

Sam sat on the floor for a minute, still reeling from the entire experience. He set the phone down, got up, and cleaned up, both himself and the side of the bed. He got into a pair of old sweatpants, went back upstairs, tossed the pot stickers into the garbage, and curled up on the couch again, hugging the San Pellegrino bottle as he restarted *Dancing with the Stars*.

But he barely noticed Giles Marini or anybody else. He was too busy thinking of Wednesday, and Mitch.

IT WAS warm but not hot when Sam parked in the street near Los Dos Amigos on Wednesday. His car had nearly died again, this time at the stoplight on Main Street, but by some miracle it started up again, and he was able to get to the restaurant on time. The unseasonal chill of May was easing into hints of summer, and Sam had declined, with relish, to wear a coat. He'd worn, in fact, as little as possible, and made sure what he wore was as *tight* as possible. Delia had given him a very pointed look, but he'd ignored her. Nothing and nobody was going to ruin this night.

Emma, surprisingly, had tried.

"I like the new confidence," she'd said, "and I love that you've dumped the creep show boyfriends, but I think you're kind of building this all up in your head. It's just dinner and another boinkfest. I don't even know where you're going to do it, because your aunt and uncle will be home."

"We'll work something out, I'm sure," Sam had replied, a little archly, because he didn't like that she was doubting him. Wasn't she supposed to be on his side?

At any rate, it was Wednesday now, and he was here, ready for the night to begin. Los Dos was not a very big place, and if someone wanted to be nasty, it probably qualified as a bit of a dive. But it *was* excellent Mexican, probably because it was run by actual Mexicans. Not that this was so novel anymore, even in Iowa, but Sam always thought it helped. Besides, the waiters were nice to him.

Mitch was sitting at the bar when Sam came in the door, and he grinned and came off his stool to greet Sam. "Howdy, Sunshine," he said, and he widened his grin when Sam blushed. Then he fished into his pocket and pulled out Sam's iPhone.

Sam took it from him and resisted the urge to stroke it lovingly. "Thanks." He started to put it into his pocket, but he stopped, realizing it wasn't going to work, not with these jeans.

Mitch was watching him struggle, a look of appreciation in his eye. "Hmm," he said after a lengthy perusal. Then he held out his hand again.

Sam handed the phone back over. "Thanks. I won't forget," he promised.

"Me either," Mitch said, but his eyes were still on the jeans. When he lifted his eyes at last, his lips twitched, and there was a wicked glint in his baby blues. He nodded at the dining room. "Where would you like to sit?"

They ended up in a booth. Sam chose the one in the back corner, the one farthest from the door and cloaked half in shadow. There were only about fifteen people total in the place, but Sam felt like they were all watching him, and much as he hated it, he worried what they thought. He felt weird. He'd never just gone out with a guy, not like this. He'd thought he would relish it, but so far, he was just nervous.

Of course, was this even really a date? It felt a bit like one, but it was sort of backward when their "relationship" had officially started with a hard fuck in the back of a semi. It would have been more appropriate to just take back the iPhone and christen the walls of the alley with cum. But here they were, flirting politely and having dinner. It confused Sam, and it made him shy as he slid into the booth.

Mitch was already seated and poring over the menu. "Okay, I wanted burritos, but now I can't make up my mind. Jesus, it all looks good."

Sam's stomach growled as he scanned his own menu. He still hadn't been paid, and he'd had to borrow five bucks from Emma just so he could order a la carte. "They have combination plates, and then some bigger dinners that have variety," he suggested, reaching over to point out the section to Mitch. "More expensive, but you get a lot of food."

"A lot of food sounds good." He squinted at the page. "Sunshine, that isn't expensive. You should see what they charge for this sort of stuff in LA."

"You've been to Los Angeles?" Sam asked, not even bothering to hide his wistfulness.

"I've been just about everywhere," Mitch replied, still reading. "But I get out west a lot."

"Las Vegas?" Sam was surprised when Mitch's face shuttered a little.

"Not been to Sin City in awhile, no. But I am heading west, generally, in a few weeks, after a quick run east."

"Do you just go all over?" Sam asked.

Mitch nodded. "I do deliveries on contract, and I like to stagger them so that I get around pretty much everywhere. I hate sitting too long in one place."

The waiter appeared and asked how they were doing and what they'd like to drink. It was Damario, one of Sam's favorite waiters, and Damario recognized him, too, looking hopeful. Mitch ordered a Bohemia with some relish. Sam eyed the margarita menu longingly but asked for a glass of water. Damario's hopeful look fell again. He knew

that when Sam started with water, he was looking at an order of less than five dollars and a tip of about fifty cents.

When the waiter put down the bowl of chips, Sam's stomach growled again, so loudly that for a moment he worried Mitch had heard. He quickly scooped up a few of the chips, not even bothering with the salsa in an effort to get something into his stomach. He realized in hindsight he should have eaten a few spoonfuls of peanut butter before coming.

"That's kind of cool that your company sends you so many places," Sam said, dipping chips two at a time into the dish of salsa.

"I don't work for a company." Mitch waited until Sam cleared the bowl a second time before taking a more modest serving for himself. "I operate independently, one gig at a time. Sometimes I contract out for a bit. Mostly, I just run my rig across the country."

So he wasn't in Iowa long, Sam realized, deflating a little. Or maybe even often.

Mitch nodded thanks at the waiter as he brought their drinks. He eyed Sam's glass of water with open criticism. "Not a drinker, huh?"

"No, I—" Sam shifted awkwardly in his chair and clutched at his glass. "I just wanted water, tonight, is all." He took a drink, then reached for more chips.

"You travel much?" Mitch asked, sipping at his beer. "Got a favorite part of the country?"

"I haven't been much of anywhere," Sam confessed after swallowing another mouthful. He eyed the nearly empty bowl longingly. God, he was just so hungry. Had he even eaten lunch? "I got as far as Minneapolis and Chicago for school trips, and when I was six, Mom took me to the Black Hills, but I don't remember much of it. Otherwise it's just been Middleton with a few trips to Des Moines every now and again." He ate more chips, telling himself these would be his last for a while, but he got distracted and reached for more as he spoke again. "I *want* to travel. It just doesn't work out so well."

"Why not?" Mitch asked, leaning back in the booth. "You got legs."

"But not money." The confession felt too bald out loud, so Sam sipped at his water and shrugged, trying to make light. "I'm busy enough with work and school. Maybe someday."

"Maybe so," Mitch agreed, and sipped his beer again.

The waiter came and replaced their empty chip tray, and Sam was in it again almost before he left.

Mitch picked up his menu again. "Hell, Sunshine, I can't decide what to order. What are you getting?"

"Two tamales," Sam said.

"There's a combo that comes with tamales? Where?" Mitch frowned. "I don't see it."

"I'm not ordering a combo." Sam pointed to the à la carte menu on the back. "There are a few dinners with tamales, though."

Mitch gave him a long hard look. "That's *all* you're getting?"

"I'm not that hungry," Sam lied. When Mitch looked pointedly at the rapidly emptying bowl of chips, Sam fought like hell not to blush.

Mitch opened the menu back to the dinner section. "Well, if you *were* hungry, what would you get? Help me make up my mind."

Sam moved his water and leaned over the booth a little. "Number one and number two are both really good. If you're after tamales, though, you want number six. Or eight, but eight is pretty small. Though it has enchiladas, and their enchiladas are to die for. But if you still want burritos, get number three and ask them to swap the chalupa for a tamale. They charge most people to switch, but they won't because you're with me."

Mitch ran his finger down the list of entrees. "What about this steak fajita?"

Sam's mouth was starting to water. "That's really good too. *Huge,* though."

"Are we ready to order, amigos?" Damario asked, reappearing with his pad and pen at the ready.

"Yeah," Mitch said, speaking before Sam could. "I'm gonna get the steak fajita, but get me a burrito to go too—just wrap it up in foil or something and put it in a bag." He nodded at Sam but looked at Damario as he pointed at the menu. "Sunshine here's having number

six." Sam sputtered, but Mitch ignored him and continued speaking to Damario. "What's he usually drink when he comes here?"

Damario was scribbling madly and, Sam knew, trembling over the tip potentials. "My amigo Sam usually has a strawberry margarita. A large," he added, quickly.

"Mitch!" Sam said, finally finding his voice.

But Mitch was still ignoring him, and was now looking at Damario with irritation. "Deja esta mierda de 'amigo'. No soy un pinche gringo quién te necesita besar el culo!"

Sam blinked, speechless again. Mitch had just rattled off what seemed to Sam perfect Spanish. It must have been at least close, because Damario blinked and laughed before replying in Spanish. Sam didn't know what he said, but Damario's tone was lighter, Sam noticed, and less kiss-assy. Sam listened to them, ignorant, and more than a little jealous.

"Why did you do that?" he asked when Damario finally left with the menus.

"Sorry," Mitch said, not sounding very sorry at all. "I just hate it when they pull that 'amigo' shit. I know it strokes all the white boy egos and gets more tips, but that ain't me. I grew up in the Valley, and it sets my teeth on edge to be treated like I'm the assholes they made so much fun of."

"I meant why did you order for me?" Sam frowned. "What do you mean you grew up 'the Valley'?"

"South Texas. I could spit over the border. My first boyfriend was Mexican, and he taught me his 'Valley Spanish', It's kind of a perversion of both English and Spanish, but it comes in handy sometimes." He took another swig of beer. "As for your dinner—" He pointed with his beer bottle at the chips. "I ordered for you because you're starving. And I'm buying, so just let it go."

Sam blushed. "I just—it's awhile to payday…." He gave up and hunched his shoulders over his water.

"Don't worry about it." Damario returned with the margarita, and Mitch pushed it in front of Sam. "Drink."

Sam did. Even with the chips, he felt the alcohol screaming through his system. He was almost glad for it, and he drank a little

faster to hurry himself to the place where the tequila would take all the hard edges off his day. “Thank you,” he said when the alcohol softened him enough.

Mitch pulled the iPhone out of his pocket and held it out in to Sam again. “I’ve been wanting to know about this. I figured out how to make the music work after a bit of fiddling, but what’s this about video? That movies? You can put movies on this thing?”

“Yes, but I don’t have any loaded yet.” Sam carefully took the iPhone from him and scrolled through the cover art. “You can get the whole Internet though, anywhere. That’s what I love about it. And it has a GPS, and so many cool apps. And my music, of course.”

“You got good music on here,” Mitch said. “I don’t know even half of it, but I liked it.”

Sam tried not to beam, but it was hard. “I get it from all over the world, from friends. I don’t *mean* to pirate,” he said quickly. “But half the time you can’t even get it, or if you can, it’s all import and priced more than anybody’d pay. But I buy a lot, too, as much as I can. It evens out.” He took another generous sip of margarita, and it was enough, apparently, to completely loosen his tongue. “I love my iPhone. I named her—Judy.”

Mitch gave him an odd look. “Garland?”

Sam grinned. “Bernly. From *9 to 5.* The Dolly Parton movie, you know? Jane Fonda’s character was Judy Bernly. My mom and I used to watch that movie every year on New Year’s.”

Mitch laughed. “I saw you had her on here too—Parton, that is. Country, pop, jazz—hell, Sunshine, you’ve got a whole music store here.” He palmed the iPhone and nodded approvingly at the face. “I gotta get me a Judy of my own, I’m thinking. A guy in Minneapolis showed me how to hook it up to the radio. Though, that reminds me—I about ran you clean out of battery. Poor Darin couldn’t even get his texts through. I would have charged it, but I could not for the life of me figure out how.”

“You have to have a special cord.” Sam was smiling now, a little too much. He was definitely feeling the alcohol, and between it and the way Mitch’s fingers kept brushing his, he was feeling very warm, and very happy.

They pulled apart when Damario came with their food, and for several minutes they ate in silence. Sam was still starving, but the chips had dulled his hunger enough that, combined with the laziness of the alcohol, he could slow down and enjoy his meal. He lingered over his enchiladas, savoring the melty cheese, the shredded chicken, and the oh-so-yummy red sauce before breaking into the tamales with a very quiet sigh.

"Oh my God, they're so good." Sam leaned back and letting the taste roll around him. "I don't know why, but I love them."

Mitch eyeballed them critically from the other side of the booth before reaching over with his fork. He hesitated over Sam's plate, though, looking up at him silently for permission. Sam nodded and scooted the plate toward him, watching as Mitch took a bite.

"They're not bad," Mitch said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "But mine are better."

"You *make* tamales?" The very idea melted Sam's brain.

"Sure. Nothing to it. Of course, mine aren't anything compared to—" He stopped short.

"To?" Sam prompted.

But Mitch only shook his head. "Little bastard just pops into my head every time I'm around you, doesn't he, Sunshine?" Mitch murmured, and returned his focus determinedly back into his plate.

That comment made absolutely no sense to Sam, but something about Mitch's body language told him it would be unwise to ask, so he didn't. A strange silence came up between them, subtle, but significant. Mitch retreated back into his fajitas, but Sam lingered a moment, watching him eat.

"So you're heading to Chicago?" he asked.

Mitch nodded. "Yeah." He still looked gruff. "In fact, to be honest, I should head out as soon as we're done here."

Sam's chin came up sharply. "What?"

Mitch cleared his throat. His face was blank, no more teasing left in it at all. "Yeah, sorry about that, Sunshine. It's part of a delivery to Denver. I'm hoping to pick up jobs from there all the way to LA. They need the warehouse in Chicago tomorrow morning, so I have to head

there tonight. I had to push to keep my meeting with you, to tell you the truth."

It was a good excuse—valid and everything. But there was something about the way Mitch said it that made Sam feel funny, like Mitch was lying.

God, did he not *want* to have sex with Sam again?

What the hell had Sam said to screw this up?

Sam stopped eating and ducked his head, trying to hide his reaction. He felt foolish and confused. And cheated. *It doesn't matter. This was never going to be a long term thing anyway.* But it did matter. Telling himself not to be disappointed didn't make his feelings stop.

"You all right?"

Sam startled at Mitch's drawl and hurried to pick up his fork. "Oh, fine." He poked at his tamale, but he didn't eat anymore.

Damario came back and tried to press dessert or more drinks, but Sam insisted he was too full, and Mitch declared that he "had to get going," which made Sam's hollowed-out stomach even more uninterested in food. He tried to soothe himself, to remind himself he'd had a nice dinner, and really, he should be glad for that. Maybe they'd meet up next time Mitch was in town. Sam tried to rationalize his emotions—he really did. But it wasn't working.

Mitch had Damario bend down low so he could whisper in his ear, and he pressed a twenty into the waiter's hand as he did so. When Damario rose, his expression was bright as he hurried away. He came back with a brown bag and their bill.

"I conned him into letting me have some Bohemia to go," Mitch explained once Damario left again. He tossed several bills onto the table and rose. "You ready?"

Sam nodded and followed him, his heart beating a little faster. *Now he leaves.* Sam staggered in the narrow hallway and out the door, and his heart both fluttered and ached as Mitch's hand snaked out and caught his arm to steady him. When he kept hold of Sam even in the alley, Sam couldn't help but lean against him just a little, letting the touch and feel of the other man's body send an electrical charge into his own. What he wouldn't give for just one last time.

"Steady there, Sunshine," Mitch said when Sam listed a little too hard.

Sam's head was spinning. "That margarita went straight to my head," he confessed. *Don't go. Not yet. Not ever. Don't go.*

"Seeing's how you drank most of it before you started eating, I'm not surprised."

Sam leaned on Mitch and put his hand on the other man's stomach, feeling the warmth and firmness of him. When Mitch turned, Sam all but slid into his arms, tipping his head up to smile in what he hoped was a seductive gesture, though he was aware that it might have just been goofy. Sam's heart soared. *Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.*

Please.

Mitch was looking at him oddly, like he was trying to read his face. Sam worked hard to make his face say "Take me somewhere and fuck me." For a minute he thought it must have worked, because after a few seconds, Mitch reached around Sam's body, and Sam moved closer, thinking he was embracing him. But when he let go, Sam realized that Mitch had just been putting the bag of beer into the same hand that held his bag of burrito.

"You are something else, Sunshine." Mitch reached up with his free hand to stroke Sam's cheek. But it fell away again, and nothing else happened.

Sam tried to reply, tried to say, "You are too," but his heart was pounding hard now, and he couldn't speak.

They were walking down the street, to where, Sam wasn't quite sure, but what he did know was that this evening was about to end. Mitch had returned his phone, and bought him dinner, and now they were done. Sam wished desperately that he could invite Mitch to his place, to convince him he could be just a little later, but he knew his aunt and uncle were home and that he didn't dare. He tried instead to think of some way to extend the evening, or to make another date, but he wasn't sure how. Ask for a phone number? It seemed like a good idea, but he couldn't work out how to phrase it. Everything felt too blunt. His brain scrambled for something, anything, but nothing seemed to work, and the next thing he knew, Mitch was turning toward him, and Sam knew it was over.

"I should head," Mitch said.

"Sure," Sam replied, trying to sound casual, to keep the *no, no, no!* he wanted to shout from echoing in his voice. "It's a long way to Chicago."

Mitch frowned briefly at Sam. "You're not quite fit to drive, though. I'd offer to take you, but I walked over here from the highway where I left my rig."

"I'll walk with you," Sam said quickly.

"That's quite a walk," Mitch pointed out.

"I don't mind." Sam shrugged, then ran a hand self-consciously against the side of his hair. "I'll sober up on the way there and back."

He braced, sure that Mitch was going to refuse him, and his heart was poised to plummet. There was somebody else. That was what this was. *Little bastard just pops into my head every time I'm around you, doesn't he?* That's what Mitch had said. Who the fuck was the "little bastard"? And why the hell was he getting in the middle of Sam's sex life? Sam looked up at Mitch and saw the rejection there, ready.

Fuck this. Sam put his hand on Mitch's arm. "Please?" He held his breath.

He honestly hadn't thought it would work, but it did. Mitch didn't say anything, but he reached over and touched Sam's hand on his arm, and nodded. He stepped away from Sam then, but he made room on the sidewalk beside himself, slowing and reaching out to steady Sam when he stumbled.

Hope stirred. *It's not over yet.* Sam wasn't sure exactly what it was he was so desperate to find, or why he had to work so hard in the first place, but he knew this was the way to it, whatever it was. As the night closed in around them, he let Mitch lead him down Main Street and to the west, toward the highway and whatever waited there for him.

"SO HOW'S Darin?" Mitch asked, as they wound their way through the outskirts of Middleton. He reached up to his shirt pocket, patted it, and sighed. "You relieve him of his misery yet, Sunshine?" Sam winced, and Mitch laughed. "What's this—trouble in paradise?"

"Darin is no paradise," Sam said, glad the darkness hid his flaming cheeks. "He's not anything. We just—" He searched for a polite euphemism, then gave up. "—fuck."

"Ah," Mitch said in a knowing tone. "He thought it was more than just fucking?" *Fuckin'*. He made it sound so dirty. And good.

"No. I just don't want to anymore, with him." Sam shrugged. "He just wants a hot hole delivered to his door." Sam clapped a hand over his mouth and stumbled. "I can't believe I just said *hot hole*," he whispered.

Mitch laughed and righted him casually, but carefully. "You do have one, Sunshine."

His hand lingered on Sam's back, and it made him bold. "Maybe I'll rent it out."

"If it's for sale, then put me in line for first bid." The hand slid lower. "Maybe I'll put you on retainer and take you on the road."

Sam felt a wicked thrill at his words, and an even darker rush at knowing a part of him wished Mitch were serious. He leaned on him, just a little.

A car drove by, someone shouted, "Sam Keller is a faggot!" as an empty beer can sailed out a back window.

Mitch kicked it with a little force as it bounced against his foot. "Nice town."

Sam felt jarred, but he shrugged and tried to pretend it didn't matter. "That was Keith Jameson." Then he realized what *else* was supposed to have happened on Wednesday. "Oh!" he said, and clamped a hand over his mouth. He giggled and lowered his hand again. "Oh God, I forgot! I was supposed to blow him in the bathroom! I bet he's pissed." Sam realized what he'd just admitted and glanced nervously at Mitch.

Mitch was looking at him with a strange expression on his face.

"Sorry," Sam stammered, shame welling hard and fast inside him. "I—I'm not—" How could he claim he wasn't always such a slut, when in all honesty, he was? He looked down, flushing hotly. "I don't mean to expose myself as such a horny little tart."

"Tarts are good," Mitch said, and his drawl was thick as he added, "You'd be a strawberry, I think."

Sam put his hands in his own pockets. They were walking very slowly now, and it was easier for him to stay upright. "Emma—my best friend—says I need higher standards."

Mitch snorted. "Hope you didn't tell her about our little alley adventure, then."

"Oh no. She liked that. Said it was 'hard-core' and—" He found he didn't want to call their encounter a "hot fling," even though it was. "Anyway. She just doesn't like Darin or Keith."

"How about 'Billy' or 'Travis' or somebody else?"

"The gay scene's pretty thin around here," Sam said with deep regret. "I wish I could get out. I wish you *would* kidnap me." He winced and rubbed at his cheek. "Sorry. Tequila makes me stupid."

"Charming," Mitch corrected. "You'll get out. You're getting your degree—that's smart."

Sam pulled his hands from his jean pockets and wrapped his arms around himself. "Em says I just have to get through it, but sometimes I worry—it's not like they make college hard for no reason. What if I can't cut it as a nurse, either? What if I flunk out before I can even try? God, I'll end up the manager of the McDonald's, and when I'm forty they'll arrest me for indecent acts with a hamburger bun, I'll be so pathetic."

"If you turn out that bad," Mitch said dryly, "I promise then I *will* kidnap you. But you won't, Sunshine."

"How do *you* know?" Sam demanded. "You've only met me twice."

"And had quite a phone conversation too," Mitch reminded him.

"Sure. So, if I fail school, I'll sell my ass and do phone sex." Mitch stopped walking, and Sam did, too, but the fire had gone out of him now. "Sorry," he murmured, averting his eyes. "I don't mean to be so pathetic. It just seems to happen naturally." There was a long, uncomfortable pause, and Sam used the time to try and stare a hole in the ground in hopes it would swallow him whole.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the highway. They had come out Chestnut Street, which at this point was a series of gas stations, two car dealerships, and a smattering of fast food places. One of the gas stations was sort of a truck stop, and Sam could see several

semis lined up along the back. One of them, he noticed, had a blue cab. It was nearly over, and as usual, he'd bungled everything. He was just lifting his head to murmur as un-awkward a goodbye as he could manage when Mitch spoke.

"Why *don't* you leave?"

Sam frowned at him. "What?"

"Leave Middleton. Leave Iowa. Get out there in the wide world and see for yourself. Find out if you're pathetic, or if it's just what people told you to be and you started to believe it."

For several seconds Sam could only stare at him. "Just like that? Leave school? Leave—everything?"

Mitch shrugged. "Finish your semester, obviously. But yeah. Then go. Just walk out and into something different. Don't be safe. Just go be."

"You're serious," Sam said, gobsmacked. He tilted his head to the side. "Is that what you did?"

Mitch's grin was rueful. "No. But it's what I wish now that I had."

Sam didn't know what to do with this. Denial seemed the safest road. "I can't."

"You can," Mitch countered, still smiling. He nodded to the highway. "We should keep heading on."

"But how do you know?" Mitch was walking again, and Sam followed, but he felt more unsteady now than when he'd first stumbled drunkenly out of Los Dos. "How can you just look at me and know?"

He expected—wanted—Mitch to give him a funny look and tell him he was just making conversation, or being clever, or something, anything to dismiss it. But Mitch just looked pained.

"I—I don't know. Forget I said anything." He patted his shirt pocket again, shrugged, and picked up his pace. "Chicago is calling. Double-time, Sunshine."

Sam ran after him, fumbling for his argument, but he felt lost again, and foolish. He knew he should just shut up and make these last few minutes count, but he was rattled. He felt like he'd gone into the wrong restaurant to meet the wrong Mitch. Wasn't this guy supposed to

be making lewd propositions and trying to feel him up under the table or do him in a bush, or something? What was with the philosophy shit?

God damn it, they hadn't even *kissed!*

That last thought was rattling hard in Sam's head as they wove their way through the cars and trucks in the parking lot to Mitch's rig, and it became a lightning rod for all Sam's fears and frustrations, sucking them all in and honing them to a single point that stood for everything he was, everything he wanted and would never be, and everything that was about to slide out of his hands. Which was probably why when Mitch turned toward him with a wry, "Well, it's been fun," look on his face, Sam stopped the words before they could come out by grabbing Mitch's shoulders, pulling him down, and kissing him.

The kiss was hard, and angry, and terrified—Sam was pretty sure he'd blown everything with this insane gesture, and since he was already fucking up, he decided to make it the biggest fuck-up on record. Mitch was going to tell people for years about the crazy psycho college kid who stuck his tongue down his throat in a truck stop parking lot, who had to be all but surgically removed from his body so he could get to Chicago on time. "He was a good lay," he could hear Mitch saying in this imagined future. "Too bad he was batshit crazy too."

But Mitch wasn't pushing him away. At first he was sort of frozen, but only for a few seconds. There was one more pause as Mitch clutched awkwardly at Sam's shoulders, and then, as if he'd been fishing for a gear and found it, he was kissing Sam back, rough and deep.

"Up," Mitch murmured, kissing Sam once more before turning him around and pushing him into the driver's seat before coming in after him. "In."

They fumbled their way around the gearshift and the console—Sam had a brief glimpse of a dashboard that could have rivaled the cockpit of a small airplane, and then all he saw was Mitch as the truck driver pushed him back against a gray curtain hanging between the driver and passenger seats. The curtain gave way, and then they were through it, and Sam was falling backward onto the floor, dragging Mitch with him.

They were in some sort of room: small, but also spacious, given that it was at the back of a semi. Sam saw the black screen of a flat screen television and what looked like a mini-fridge and microwave. *He has half an RV in here!* Sam thought, but when Mitch's body pressed against his, he didn't think of anything else, except that if this semi had a TV, it very probably had a bed.

"I gotta get to Chicago," Mitch murmured, but he was nibbling his way down the side of Sam's face as he said it, and his hand was fumbling at Sam's fly.

Take me with you, Sam thought, but when Mitch paused, he realized that, actually, he'd said that out loud.

In the dark, he could see the outline of Mitch's face as it lifted over his head, but he could not read his expression. He could guess it, though, when he felt a hand knead gently at his hips, and his heart stopped as Mitch spoke.

"You want to come?"

The whole universe seemed to stop as that question hung in the air between them. Nothing moved, and nothing made a sound. There was only Sam, and the furious beating of his heart, and Mitch, and the soft, unsteady breaths that warmed the air between them. Mitch was serious. He was seriously asking, and Sam, mad as he was, was seriously considering taking him up on it. As he stared up at the other man, he could even see it: they'd drive to Chicago and then head on south, and west, just like Mitch had said. Together. They'd ride all day and make love all night.

Together.

And just as quickly as the vision rose, it faded away.

Sam reached up and pressed a hand to Mitch's chest, and stared at it. "I can't."

He wanted, he realized, for Mitch to push him, to drive him to saying yes the way that Emma would. But Mitch didn't. He only bent down and brushed a soft, sad kiss against Sam's lips.

"I gotta go," he whispered.

"Kiss me first," Sam whispered back, still touching him. "Once more, before you go."

He felt Mitch's smile against his lips, and it made him shiver. "So you can leave me blue-balled again?"

I don't want to leave you at all. The thought terrified Sam and made him sad. He nodded and said gruffly, "Yeah."

Mitch took Sam's mouth again, and Sam wrapped his arms around the other man's neck and surrendered to him. Mitch moved against him, too, sliding his hips over Sam's, pressing their imprisoned cocks up against one another as he delved deeper and deeper into Sam's mouth, echoing the contact above and below until they were humping one another and panting, and then Mitch gripped Sam's waistband, tugged hard, and they tumbled into the act they'd been dancing around all night.

"Only for you, Sunshine," Mitch murmured into Sam's ear as he coaxed Sam's hips off the floor so he could pull his jeans down. "Only because it's you."

"We can be fast," Sam breathed, fumbling as he tried to help Mitch undress him.

"I don't want to be fast. But we'll have to be anyway." Mitch pulled back, drawing Sam upright with him. "Take off your shirt so I can taste your skin."

Sam was so hot and so hard that he hurt as he squirmed out of his T-shirt, tossing it off into the darkness, crying out and arching as Mitch's mouth opened against his chest. He clutched Mitch's head and tried to aim him at his nipple, which made Mitch rumble wickedly and reach up to tweak one gently before suckling the other sharply between his teeth. Sam gasped once, and then again as Mitch's hand slipped down and took his cock in possession, stroking it several times before letting it go, rising, and pushing Sam back against the floor.

He made quick work of Sam's shoes and his already half-removed jeans, and then, when Sam was naked except for his socks, opened his legs wide, lifted his ass high off the floor and sucked hard on the inside of his thigh. Mitch was still clothed, which made it all the more erotic that Sam was fully exposed. Sam arched and lifted his hips up toward Mitch's mouth, gasping as those lips dragged down to the juncture of his thighs and his waiting cock.

The sex this time was like a blur. One moment Sam was arching up to keep his cock where Mitch could reach it, the next he felt a lubed

finger entering him, and then he was holding his legs back against his body, spreading himself as Mitch entered him. He gave over to the sensation of being fucked, to being with Mitch, of letting go so much that he was practically a rag doll Mitch was fucking against the floor. The technicolor built as the other man thrust, and once he'd come, it took only a few strokes to bring himself along after.

On the cold, metal floor of the semi, with Mitch still pressed inside him and with a pool of cooling semen on his naked stomach, Sam was, for one moment, complete.

Then Mitch pulled away, and it was over.

He pressed a kiss against Sam's face. "Oh, Sunshine." Another kiss, this one lingering against Sam's lips. Then he rose, gathered Sam's clothes, and handed them to him.

He also passed over a paper towel, which Sam used to clean himself. He stumbled into his clothes, feeling heavy and sad, and a little angry. Not at Mitch, but at something, and he couldn't name it, which made him even angrier. When he was dressed, he stood and faced his lover. This couldn't end, and yet it was about to. Sam felt tongue-tied and lost, unsure of how to make it end or whether or not it should.

It was Mitch who acted; he reached for a pad of paper up by the driver's seat, and after scribbling something on a page, he handed it to Sam. "In case you ever decide to put out that lease," he said, teasing, but there was a gruffness about him that made Sam ache all over again. Sam took it, then pocketed the paper with an almost wooden nod. Mitch helped him back over the captain's chairs to the door and handed him his iPhone.

"You sure you're gonna be okay walking back?" Mitch asked, looking doubtful. "I could drive you near home at least."

Sam shook his head. "I'll be fine." He tried to smile but then just gave up and kissed Mitch one more time softly on his lips. "Thanks," he whispered.

"Bye, Sunshine," Mitch replied, and closed his door.

Sam watched the semi pull onto the road and onto the interstate. It felt surreal as he watched it happen, and even odder when he replayed it in his mind as he walked back through town to his car, which only faltered twice before starting. He drove home slowly, playing echoes of

the evening over in his mind, but by the time he reached Cherry Hills, it almost seemed like a dream.

It did become a dream once he went to bed. He dreamed of Mitch kissing him, Mitch pressing inside him, Mitch smiling at him. He woke hard, aching, and ready to cry.

I should have gone with him. Sam didn't know how he could have, but as he woke that morning, all he knew in life was that he should have gone with Mitch, no matter what the consequences. But Mitch was gone. It was too late.

HE WENT through the next day like a zombie, and the next, and the next, and the next. He almost called Mitch twice, but he couldn't think of what to say. He ignored Darin entirely, and when Keith caught him in the hall and asked him what the fuck he was doing, Sam just ducked beneath his arm and went to class.

Sam didn't care. He didn't care about anything. He felt wrong, and empty, except when he lay in bed. There he just felt raw and hurt and terrified. Not even a visit to his mother's urn could make these feelings go away, and he couldn't understand why.

The night before school term ended he lay in bed with Judy clutched in his hand, stroking her side as he stared at Mitch's contact information typed so carefully on the screen. *Come get me*, he wanted to say. *Come back, and take me with you. I don't care. I don't know why I want you, but I do, so please, please come get me.*

But he didn't call him. He just went to bed, and the next day, as he knew he would for the rest of the summer, he got up, got showered, and went to work.

Except when he got there, Delia was waiting for him, one hand on her hip, the other resting at her side. She was holding something black and small inside her hand as she stood in the middle of the cold care aisle, her fury radiating off her in icy waves.

"Where were you, Sam," she asked, biting off each consonant, "that day you unloaded stock? The day you asked me to give you a free apartment? Where were you *really* when I called for you?"

Sam stilled. Something was wrong here, and something told him the wrong answer was going to send him to hell, but the trouble was, he didn't know what the right answer was. He fished for a safe response, and settled on Emma's lie. "I was back in the shelves, and I didn't hear you."

Delia's smile was tight as she lifted whatever it was she was holding. "No," she said, using the word like a lash. "You weren't."

Sam frowned, then froze as he got a good look at what she held in her hand.

It was a videotape.

Chapter 4

"WHAT—" Sam's voice broke, and he swallowed to try and right it. "What's that?"

"Security footage. I borrowed it from the bike shop. I knew you were up to something in that alley, and this morning I realized I could find out exactly what by checking the security footage." Delia rattled the tape, but she didn't smile, not even in triumph. In fact, the more she spoke, the more disgusted she looked. "I *watched* it. I watched it, Sam, and I was nearly *sick.*"

Sam wasn't feeling so good himself. But Mitch had shut the door! What had they done outside? What—? He took a step backward and glanced around, wondering who else was witnessing this little scene. There were no customers, which made sense—Delia would never do this in front of *customers.* Steve, though, was back in the pharmacy, and Sam could see from his expression and the way he focused so intently on the printout in his hand that he was listening to every word.

"What did you do," Delia hissed, "in that trailer? With that *man?*"

Sam's face was hot, but his blood was cold. Honestly, he wasn't sure how much longer he could stand upright. "I—I—" he stammered, but he couldn't manage anything else. This was his worst nightmare come true. This was everything he never wanted to happen.

It was tainting the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Delia tucked the videotape under her arm and gave Sam such a dirty look that you'd have suspected he was about to start fucking someone right there in front of her. "You make me *sick*. Utterly, completely *sick.* Carrying on like that not just while you were at work,

but in my shop! Right there where anyone could see you! I only hope no one else has seen this! To think what a laughingstock you would have made me! Made all of us!"

Sam took another step back and ran into a display of books. He reached out for it both to right it and to steady himself. What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to say?

Delia didn't seem to think he should say anything, because she just kept talking, and every word was a knife. "Your mother," she said, spitting out the word. "Your poor mother—thank God she's not alive to see you like this!" Her lip curled into a sneer. "It's her own fault for encouraging you, but even she shouldn't have had to see what you've become."

That's not fair, Sam wanted to say, because it wasn't, to judge him like that for one incident. But *he* knew what else he'd done, and how much more he wanted to do. He hated Delia for invoking his mother, but he couldn't argue with her. He just stood there, taking it, feeling small and miserable and dirty, not knowing what to do or say. He just waited for her to finish, to throw him out, so this could end.

"Quite obviously," she went on, "you won't get paid for that day." She snorted. "I'd love to fire you for it, but that gets me nowhere. Just gives you more time to plan your whorish little escapades, and then you'll just have them in my house when I'm not there."

Sam blinked, smarting from that blow but also from what he realized she'd just said. "You—you aren't kicking me out?"

"Oh, I'd love to," she replied tartly, "but how can I? I promised your mother I'd get you through school, even though we both know you're never going to amount to anything when you finish. *If* you finish." She looked at the ceiling, as if she could simply not stomach the sight of Sam any longer. "Just go," she said, gritting her teeth. "Leave. I don't care what you do with yourself today—just take yourself out of my sight." She leveled her gaze at him. "But you'll be at the house tonight, at six sharp. You'll be there, and you'll do whatever it is your uncle and I say it is you'll have to do to remain under our roof. You'll respect us, for starters. And there will be nothing more of what I saw on this tape. Do you understand? Nothing like this ever again, or so help me, I *will* throw you out, promise or no!"

She turned on her heel and stalked back toward the office, and Sam just watched her go, too numb, too horrified, too defeated to do anything else. It wasn't until a customer came through the door that he was able to move, and then he simply walked out the door, up the street, and up the hill.

He walked for hours, lost in a daze, lost to everything. He heard a text come through on his phone, but he didn't look at it, just reached down and turned it off inside his pocket without looking at it. He walked on, and on, and on, barely even looking up to make sure cars weren't coming before he crossed the roads.

He ended up in a cornfield.

It was June, so the field was already planted, full of neat and orderly rows of corn sprouted as far as the curve of the earth would allow him to see. The ground was black and rich, and the corn was bright green. It looked so good, so right, so full of promise.

It made Sam sad.

I promised your mother I'd get you through school, even though we both know you're never going to amount to anything when you finish.

He'd known she hated him, but he hadn't known she'd already written him off. *Never going to amount to anything*. The words kept ringing in his head, pealing like the bell of his damnation.

It's her own fault for encouraging you, but even she shouldn't have had to see what you've become.

Never going to amount to anything.

You make me sick. Utterly, completely sick.

Never going to amount to anything.

He sat there for hours, aching, miserable, so full of shame he didn't know how he was ever going to rise again. It would only get worse too. She'd yell even more tonight, and his uncle would be there too. Thank God they *hadn't* done anything outside the trailer—she was grossed out just by the touching and kissing. What if she had seen the rest?

But it was so good! It was better than anything that's ever happened to me!

Sam buried his face in his hands, let out a shuddering breath, and just held himself there, palms over his eyes, thumbs in his ears, just breathing, and breathing, and breathing.

When he was able, he pulled out his phone and turned it on to check the time. Four. He had two hours until judgment day. Oh God, he'd rather die. He scrolled through his texts, saw that Emma had left four and a voice message, too, but he couldn't deal with her just now. He couldn't talk to anyone, possibly not ever again. He couldn't—

Sam frowned at a phone number he didn't recognize at the beginning of a text. He pushed it warily to bring up the message, and then he sucked in a sharp breath.

Hey, Sunshine. Headed past your exit, and I thought of you. Hope you're having a great summer.

Sam's hands shook as he reread the text again, and again. He checked the time stamp. *1:15*. He'd been here—in Middleton!

Come back!

And the next thing Sam knew, his fingers were moving over the keypad.

Shitty summer. Shittiest ever. He shut his eyes, pressing them hard until he had himself under control, letting out an unsteady breath as he finished. *I should have gone with you.*

For some reason, *this*, not anything his aunt said, broke him, and he put the phone down on the grass beside him and buried his face in his knees.

His phone chirped out a few bars of Kylie's "Fever" to let him know he had a text. Sam hesitated, then lifted his phone from the grass with shaking hands.

I can swing back and pick you up.

And as Sam's heart pounded in his ears, another text came through.

You want me to?

The whole world stopped. Sam heard nothing, saw nothing, and knew nothing but the small, luminescent screen in his hand and the four beautiful words staring up at him. In a dream, he reached out and slowly punched in four characters, and "send."

Yes.

Then he added, a little more quickly,

Please?

His whole body ached as he waited for the reply.

Meet me at the DeSoto truck stop at 6. But call me if you have any trouble.

Sam clutched at the phone, staring at the message and trying to digest the enormity of what he had just done. And then the screen changed again.

Will you be okay until I get there?

Sam quickly typed back. *Yes.* Then he added, with shaking hands. *Thank you.*

He could almost hear the reply echoing in his head with Mitch's thick, sultry drawl.

Anytime, Sunshine. Anytime.

SAM had to move fast.

No one was in the house when he arrived, but Sam still moved through it like a thief, his heart pounding so hard he thought he was going to have an attack. But when he got to his room, he forced himself to slow and made a steady circuit of the room, pausing only occasionally to touch something, pick it up, and almost always put it down again. He lingered a long time at the bookshelf, hesitating with some anxiety over his comics. In the end he left them all, but it made him feel sick, knowing there was a good chance she'd sell them, or worse still, throw them away. He'd have to have Emma come over and take them.

Emma. He pulled out his phone, but he just as quickly put it away. No. She'd talk him out of this. He'd call her once he was on the road.

Should you be talked out of this? a voice of reason whispered inside him, but he shoved it into the bottom of his backpack with the rest of the clothes he was stuffing inside. He had to go. He had to do this, to try.

In the end, from his room he only took toiletries and clothes, packing his backpack until it was bursting, but when he was done he went back up the stairs. He was terrified every second of hearing the key in the lock of the front door, but the sound didn't come, and he forced himself to calm. He had a half an hour left. Plenty of time.

He dropped his backpack with a weighty thud in a chair in the living room and hurried into the kitchen. When he came back, he had an empty plastic food container in his hand, which he opened as he approached the small, lavish urn on the narrow shelf. With great care, he set them both down on the brick before the fireplace, opened the urn, and dumped the contents into the plastic tub.

He was *not* leaving without her. Sam's hands shook while he poured, thinking that *now* he would feel the ghosts, and they would beat him and pin him to the floor and send him instantly to hell for messing with his mother's ashes, but nothing happened, and once he sealed the container shut, he felt calm again. Sam recapped the urn quickly and placed it back on the mantel.

To get the container into his pack, he had to lose two T-shirts, and these he stuffed into the bottom of a decorative, wide-mouthed vase in a corner because he was now so panicked about getting caught that he didn't want to even take the time to run back downstairs. His need to get away was becoming an acute urgency, as if the whole universe were about to press on him and keep him in place, to trap him in Delia's clutches forever. At this point he didn't care if it were a real or imagined threat—he just didn't want it to happen, period.

Sam dragged his pack across the floor and left.

He went around to the back of the house, got in his car, drove through the development onto the highway, and headed south toward Desoto, and the interstate. He was going. He was *gone.* His panic began to abate. This was going to work! This was going to happen—he was really leaving! He was actually doing it! And it was going to *work!*

Fifteen minutes from the interstate his car died.

Sam stared at the dashboard as he angled the car as far over on the shoulder as he could, letting the loud silence of the car fill his ears and his head. He tried to start it again, and again, and again; he even got out and opened the hood, looking for something obvious that was unhooked, but he wouldn't have known what to do with it even if he'd

seen something. It all just looked like car to him. He went back inside and tried several more times to get the engine to turn over, but it wouldn't budge, and now it was clearly flooded too.

Was this a sign? Was *this* his mom, interfering, stopping him from doing something really, really stupid?

It *was* stupid, he thought, and doubt swamped him in a flood. This was crazy. This was insane. He couldn't run off like this! He just couldn't! It was stupid, it was reckless! And *he* was stupid and reckless! He couldn't even keep his car running! Now he was skipping off with his alley fuck! What the hell did he think he was going to prove? He should go back. He should go back.

Never going to amount to anything.

You make me sick. Utterly, completely sick.

Never going to amount to anything.

The doubt rose higher, crested, and then, suddenly it was gone, beat back by an unexpected lightning strike of anger.

He wasn't going back. He wasn't *ever* going back.

Sam sorted furiously through his backpack, taking more and more out of it until it was light enough that he could carry it on his back. He got out of the car, locked it, and headed south, texting madly as he went.

My car died on 965, he typed to Mitch, *but I'm coming on foot as fast as I can.*

The distance between where he was and the interstate was nothing by car, but it was going to take a miracle for him to get there when he was running with a backpack strapped to him. He only stopped when his text message chimed again, but he growled in frustration and stowed it when he saw that it was only Emma again. He didn't have time for that now. He had to go. He had to get there, because he'd missed his destiny the first time. He wasn't going to let it slip away again.

But when he stepped into a rabbit hole on the side of the road and twisted his ankle, he went down in a cry of anguish, realizing that he could never cover this distance, not in time, acknowledging that destiny would in fact brush past him again. And as he sank down into the dirt

and grass and the cold bit through his sheen of sweat, he looked up into the stars, and when his view became blurry, he let the tears fall.

The sun was setting in the west, and it was so bright Sam could barely look at it. It cast the road in brilliant orange-red light, making the shadows of the road signs and fence posts so long they seemed to go on forever. It glared over the rim of the world, over the last hill that Sam could see, where, just beyond his vision, the interstate wound its way to Omaha and on toward Denver. He could see the tips of the signs advertising the truck stop where Mitch was waiting.

Sam got up, put his pack back on his shoulders, and limped on.

Somehow he made it to the top of the hill, and though he still had another half a mile to go, he could see the truck stop in the distance. He searched madly for the blue of Mitch's rig, but he couldn't see it. It was getting dark fast, and by the time he made it to the overpass it was almost completely dark. He pulled out his phone and saw that it was five minutes past the time Mitch had appointed—surely he'd wait a few minutes? Sam hurried over to the other side, but though he scanned the lot, there was no blue semi there.

He went all the way into the lot, circling it twice, but if Mitch had been there, he'd gone. *He wouldn't leave me,* he tried to reassure himself, but panic was biting hard, and his stupid tears were trying to come back. He pushed them away and headed back to the ramp, setting his jaw in determination. No. Mitch wouldn't leave. He *wouldn't.*

Though it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to call and check where he was.

Sam actually had his cell phone in his hand when the unmistakable sound of a big truck breaking and shifting gears made him pause. He looked up and saw a great hulk of a semi coming down the hill toward him, heading onto the overpass, lights blazing. It was huge. It was beautiful.

It was blue.

THE semi came to a stop in the middle of the road across from him and Mitch stuck his head out of the window.

"I about turned around and headed back to Middleton." Mitch's voice was gruff. "Where the hell did you get off to?"

"I went down to the truck stop," Sam replied, nodding over his shoulder. "Must have missed you when I was around the back." He was breathing hard. It was just hitting him how winded he was. His ankle still smarted a little, but not too much.

Mitch is here. He's going to take me with him.

Mitch jerked his head at the passenger door. "Well, come on—get in."

Sam nodded and shifted his pack as he headed around the front of the rig, but he didn't take but three steps before his ankle made him stumble. Whatever adrenaline had carried him down the hill and around the truck stop twice had run out. He had to all but drag it as he moved across the road, and it was a relief to climb up on the running board and haul open the heavy door to let himself inside.

"Why didn't you sit still, if you were hurt?" Mitch asked as he pulled himself up onto the passenger seat. He was glaring at Sam too. "Why didn't you call me?"

Sam pulled his right leg up, wincing as he did so, then shut the door. He turned to Mitch. "I don't know," he said, and it was the truth. "I was just trying to get here in time." He flushed. "Sorry."

Mitch started to speak but stopped himself. "I gotta get this thing out of the middle of the road," he said, shifting gears, and then the truck was moving again.

He'd done it, Sam realized. He'd gone with Mitch. They were going. West. He was going west, with Mitch.

Mitch's thoughts seemed to be in the same direction as he wound them around the truck stop and back toward 965 and the on-ramp. "Are you serious, Sunshine? You're coming along? All the way to LA?"

Sam only hesitated a moment before nodding. "Yeah. If that's okay."

Mitch nodded and fixed his attention to the road as he drove the rig down the rest of the hill toward the entrance to the truck stop. Sam kept quiet, watching at first with trepidation and then awe as Mitch maneuvered through the maze of vehicles and obstacles within the parking lot and back toward the road. When an SUV darted out from

behind another rig and blocked their path, Sam gasped and shut his eyes, but Mitch got the truck stopped, regrouped, and then aimed back for the road again.

"I don't know how you drive this," Sam whispered, looking around at the expanse of road they assumed as they turned out and aimed for the onramp to the interstate. "Do you ever hit anything?"

"I try not to, but let me tell you, it's usually some other asshole who pushes me into it." Mitch grimaced at the taillights of the SUV as it zipped onto the ramp. "As somebody who has personally put 250,000 miles on the U.S. Interstates in the past five years alone, I'm here to tell you, if the road 'belongs' to anybody, it's the big rigs, bringing everybody their big screen TVs and cheap toilet paper and produce off the boat from Brazil. Not to mention the damn cars that try and get us killed." He shook his head and let his shoulders relax a little. "Sorry. Trucker's soapbox. I'll try to keep it to a minimum."

Sam said nothing, just watched as Mitch turned the rig again, aiming this time onto westbound I-80. Sam paid attention to the way Mitch merged, using his mirrors, downshifting and pacing himself to try and make his way into the traffic safely. There weren't many vehicles on the road, but Sam noticed the one car in the right hand lane didn't get over when Mitch approached, not until Mitch was almost on top of him, and when he finally moved, he also honked and tossed Mitch his middle finger.

"Not if you were the last guy on earth, buddy," Mitch replied mildly. He shifted a few more times and settled back in his seat, glancing at Sam. "So."

Sam fought the urge to wriggle uncomfortably. "I guess you're wondering why I'm here."

Mitch shrugged. "Sure, but you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

"You'll just bring me along, just like that?"

"Yep," Mitch replied, keeping his eyes on the road.

Sam considered this. There had to be a catch. "I don't have money," he said nervously. "A little, but not—"

"I don't want your money, Sunshine," Mitch said gently, but firmly.

Sam watched Mitch's profile for a few minutes, trying to read him. He looked good, backlit by his dashboard. It hit Sam that it was just the two of them, so close, and that it would be this way the whole time. They'd be together all day, and all night.

Heat began to spread through Sam's body, but he wasn't embarrassed. "I won't mind paying… other ways," he said, his voice husky.

But to his surprise, Mitch didn't give him a wicked grin and a dose of innuendo—he braced, and his hands tensed on the wheel.

"You don't have to pay me anything," Mitch said tightly.

Now Sam was embarrassed. "Sorry." He turned his face away to stare out the passenger window.

Mitch sighed, a ragged sound. "Sam—" He sighed again and shifted in his seat. "Shit. I didn't mean it like that."

"No," Sam said, "It's my fault." He tucked his feet up on the seat so he could hug his knees to his chest. "I'm just… edgy. I can't really believe I'm doing this. I feel pretty stupid."

"You aren't stupid," Mitch said sternly. "If you left, it wasn't for anything but a good reason.

Sam buried his face in the valley of his knees. "I just couldn't listen to her talk like that anymore. I couldn't stand to hear it for the whole summer."

"This your aunt?" Mitch asked.

Sam nodded. "I live with her and my uncle. I have since I was fifteen, when my mom got really sick." He hugged his legs a little tighter. "She had cancer. Pancreatic cancer." He picked at a loose string at the seam of his shoes, smiling bitterly. "She had multiple sclerosis too. It started when I was really little, and it was bad by the time I was ten. Really bad. But she was evening out a little, working hard to keep herself strong, and we were going to be okay. Then, boom. Cancer." He pulled the string hard until it broke. "And she was gone."

Mitch let the silence hang a minute before saying in the same gentle tone, "And you been with your aunt and uncle since?" Sam nodded. "But you're an adult now—surely you could move out?"

"I don't have any money," Sam said miserably. "And I can't get loans for school, and it takes years to earn enough on my own before I

can get them. It's a tax thing," he said when Mitch looked confused. "My uncle claimed me, because they were my legal guardians for a year. That's all it took. With my mom alive just one more year, I'd have qualified for every need-based scholarship available. Under Uncle Norm's income, I qualify for nothing. So they pay, but not much, and only part time. Which is why it takes forever."

"But you work," Mitch pointed out, and Sam laughed.

"Yeah. For *them*. Half of what I get goes for 'room and board', and the rest I need for books and gas and clothes and sanity. It took me forever to save for that iPhone, and it's killing me to pay for the plan." He realized that now, without a job, it was going to be impossible. What would they do, he wondered, when he couldn't keep his contract?

"That's a shit deal," Mitch said, grimacing. "They owe you better than that."

Sam shrugged and went back to picking at his shoe. "They paid my mom's bills. They did take me in."

"Sounds like that's what they owe your mom." He shook his head. "Well, you're rid of them now."

Sam rested his cheek on his knees and looked out the window. "All I can think of now is how I would have been better off working the full three years until I could be declared independent and would have qualified for aid on my own. Or worked for five and been able to relax while I did it." He hesitated before letting his darkest regrets come out. "And maybe if I'd taken that time I might have realized I didn't want to be in nursing."

"You don't?" Mitch echoed.

Sam shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe." He waited for the sky to fall for admitting that, but when it didn't, it gave him the courage to continue. "I think I got into it out of guilt, because I thought I'd do it to help people, like other people helped my mom. That would have been fine if I'd have liked it, but it's mostly a lot of horrible grunt work. I don't want to wipe ass in a hospital. I don't want to work insane crazy overnight hours for years until I can get into a decent schedule. I do like health care, and it's a steady job, but—" He shook his head and sighed. "I don't know."

"You're young," Mitch said. "You got time to figure this stuff out."

"I'm not that young," Sam said tartly. "Anyway, how old are you? Eighty?"

Mitch lifted an amused eyebrow. "Thirty-three."

Okay, that *was* a lot older. "I suppose I seem like some stupid whiny kid," Sam said.

"You really like that word, don't you? 'Stupid'. Is this a gift from your aunt, or did you take that one on yourself?"

Sam didn't answer, not knowing what to say.

When Mitch spoke again, his voice was softer. "For what it's worth, you don't seem stupid, and you don't seem like a kid, either. If anything, you're too damn old for your age. I know middle-aged men who fuss less than you. How about you give yourself a break, Sunshine? You just took a pretty big leap, coming away with me like this. Yeah, there are a lot of unknowns, but you're smart, and you really don't have anything to lose. Let yourself live a little."

Sam let this sink in as much as it could. "I do have a little money saved." Guilt backwashed, though, and he had to add, "But I should really save it for fall tuition."

"You don't know yet where you're going this fall," Mitch reminded him. "If you're even going anywhere at all."

"This economy is so bad," Sam said, fear encroaching in the space guilt had made for it. "It's stupid to goof my way through the summer when I could be working, even if it is for Delia. It's stupid. *I'm* stupid."

"If you say that word one more time," Mitch warned, "I will pull this rig over and paddle your ass."

He sounded serious, and Sam wasn't quite sure what to make of that. He chose his next words carefully. "It's not smart to waste money or time."

"But if you're headed down the wrong road, you're wasting more time and energy than if you stand still awhile and try to sort yourself out. Except in your case, heading down the road is what counts as standing still. You said yourself, Sam, that you've never traveled, not really. Well, there isn't anything like changing your environment to change your mind, or at least to give you some decent perspective. You don't really know something until you've stood outside it and looked at

it objectively. Come see just a little sliver of the world with me, and I promise you even a few months on the road will change your life completely."

Sam couldn't decide if changing his life completely was exciting or terrifying. "I can't go with you for months!"

"Then come for whatever time is right for you," Mitch said, but Sam thought he sounded gruff again. He nodded at Sam. "How much money you got saved, Sunshine? Like, in a savings account. You got one with enough to buy yourself a one way plane ticket home?" Sam nodded, and Mitch did too. "Good. Then you keep that tucked aside, and everything else that's an expense on this trip is on me. You've got your exit if you need it, but other than that, you're just enjoying a little side-trip out of your usual life."

"You can't do that!" Sam cried.

Mitch laughed. "I can, and I will." He gave Sam an arch look. "Would you like to tell me that's stupid?"

There was a heat in those blue eyes that made Sam pause, and he very nearly said the word just to see if Mitch was bluffing.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked instead. "Why would you do this for me, if not for sex?"

He hadn't meant to say it like that, and he braced, waiting for Mitch to get angry, but Mitch just shook his head. If anything, he looked guilty.

"I'm not like that, Sunshine." He wiped his hand over his mouth and said, under his breath, "Not like that."

This both relieved Sam and upset him. And this was the second time Mitch had told Sam he wasn't "like that." In fact, hadn't he said the last time that he wasn't like that "anymore?"

Sam wondered if the elusive "little bastard" fit into this somehow.

"But—we *are* going to have sex," Sam said. "Aren't we? Sometimes?"

Now Mitch smiled, looking out at the road as if he were undressing it. "Oh, I have no objection to that." He flicked his thumb absently against the wheel. "Let's put it this way: I like you, Sam. I'd like to help you. I'd like to be the guy who, when you look back at this summer years from now, you think of as the friend who helped give

you the space to figure out who you really are." He winked. "And if you also think of me as a damn fine lover, too, I will not be put out in the slightest."

Sam considered all this. It felt surreal, what Mitch was saying, what he was offering, which was probably why he felt disconnected enough to say what he was feeling out loud. "I wouldn't have minded," he confessed. When Mitch glanced at him questioningly, he looked him in the eye and said, heart hammering, "being your whore."

The easy, sultry smile fled again, so quickly that Sam blinked. He didn't understand how he kept doing this, stumbling into saying things that made Mitch upset. It made him upset, too, and he panicked.

"That's what she called me," he said, almost whispering. "A whore." He swallowed hard. "That—that probably isn't good. I—I shouldn't want to be one, I guess, even with you."

Mitch could not look at him very long, but he did so as frequently as was safe, and he seemed to be studying Sam's face very carefully. His own face was unreadable.

He poked around in the dashboard for a few minutes, looking for something beneath the papers and wrappers there, but he didn't find whatever it was he was looking for and ended up tapping the steering wheel again.

"Do you say that," he asked at last, "because if I made you pay your way in ass, then it would put you off the hook for such a big decision, or because you like the idea of doing whatever I tell you, of having your body be at my command?"

Sam thought about this. "Both," he confessed, quietly.

Mitch's thumb caressed the wheel for several minutes. The road was completely dark now except for the semi's headlights, making it seem like the whole world was gone as the silence stretched on, and on, and on.

"Sorry," Sam said at last. "I don't mean to be awkward. We don't have to—"

Mitch shook his head. "It's not." He rubbed his chin with his hand and looked at Sam again. "You really want that? To play with me, like that?"

Sam was glad it was so dark, because his face had to be scarlet. “Not if you think it’s gross.”

Mitch’s laugh was like velvet. “Oh, I don’t think that at all.” He rubbed his chin again, still staring ahead at the road. Then he nodded. “Okay.”

Sam’s heart beat one hard thump against the wall of his chest. “Okay?”

“Yep. So long as you want it, so long as you get that it’s a game, and so long as you understand you can call it off at any time, I will take payment from you for your portion of this trip in ass and other acts of submission and general sluttiness.” He tapped his thumb on the wheel. “But it’s a *game*, and it only goes on so long as everybody is having a good time. You got that?”

Sam nodded, then added, “Yes.”

“The thing is,” Mitch went on, “games like this need a safe zone. You need to give me boundaries, and you need to give me a word.”

“Word?” Sam repeated, dizzy by this sudden shift. “You mean a safe word? Like in BDSM?” His voice went up on the end of the acronym.

“Just like that, yes,” Mitch said, “and from your tone there I take it bondage isn’t your thing?”

“It’s the ‘sadomasochism’ part I’m not wild about,” Sam admitted, a little faintly. He swallowed and tried to buck up a bit. “I don’t really know about bondage. I’ve never done it.”

“What have you done, Sunshine? Because I will tell you, I have done quite a bit.” Something funny passed over his face, and it was weird, but Sam thought he looked guilty. Then the look was gone. “Where are you coming from on this, Sam? Talk to me.”

Sam did a mental review of his sexual practice. It didn’t take long. “I’ve only been with a few guys,” he said, trying not to be shy. “Nobody that ever meant anything. You know about Darin. And there were a few others, but they were just one-night fucks. And guys I sucked off at school. Usually straight guys.” Sam hesitated. “I liked… I liked the way it made me feel. Kind of… vulnerable, but powerful too.”

“I already know you like direction and talking dirty,” Mitch said casually, but Sam thought there was a little heat in his tone now. Sam

wondered if Mitch was getting hard, talking about this. He knew he was.

“And I know you like it a little hard,” Mitch added. “But what about games? If I tie you up, will you freak out?”

Sam had the sudden image of Mitch binding his hands behind his back and spreading his legs open. “No,” he said hoarsely. “But—I don’t want to hurt.”

“What about exposure?” Mitch pressed. “You want this game only between us, or will you get a little kick if I let other people see that you’re doing what I tell you? Nobody that would hurt you,” Mitch said quickly, when Sam gave a quiet squeak. “And nobody who would make you feel bad about it.”

Sam’s head was reeling. “Maybe.”

Mitch tapped his thumb on the wheel again for a minute before speaking again, and when he did, there was a strange, unreadable weight to his words. “What about more than one partner? Would—would you like that?”

Yes, Sam thought, heat rising fast, *I want that so much I hurt.* But there was that odd tone in Mitch’s voice, and Sam couldn’t tell if this was something Mitch wanted, or if it was something he didn’t. He began to feel self-conscious, discussing sex so clinically. Sam hunched a little in his seat, wondering if he’d just bit off more than he could chew.

Mitch glanced at him and grimaced. “Sorry. I’m going too fast.”

“No,” Sam said quickly, even though he’d just thought the same thing. *You want this so much. Don’t fuck it up by being shy*. He tried to find the way to put his feelings into words “I—I just… like it when you make me do things. When you tell me what to do. When you tell me to take off my pants and touch myself. Or to get in the truck and take off my clothes.” He rubbed at his arms and dared a glance at Mitch. “I like having sex with you. A lot. I feel sexy when you look at me, and I feel… I don’t know, *free* when you tell me to do stuff. It’s so dirty, but it’s like, then, that it’s okay.” He stared out the windshield, fixed on an unseen point as his mind rolled all this over. “It’d be hot if you kind of… made me do stuff for other people. It’s like it’s embarrassing, and I have no control, but I do. Like you’re *making* me be sexy, so it’s not

my fault." He blushed and shook his head. "Never mind. This is stupid."

Mitch was quiet for another mile. Sam stayed quiet, too, worried that he'd broken everything already. But as they came up over a hill near a rest stop, Mitch said, "Safe word. You didn't pick one."

Sam blinked and tried to think. "Violet," he said at last.

"Favorite color?"

Sam shook his head. "Character. From *9 to 5*."

Mitch nodded. "Good. Remember Violet, then," he said, pulling the semi off on the ramp toward the rest stop, "because I believe I promised you a spanking if you said that word again."

Sam frowned, and his eyes widened. "Wait—*wait!*" He braced himself against the dash as Mitch pulled into a parking spot. "You can't be serious!"

"Oh, I'm very serious." He pulled the brake, locked the doors, then undid his seat belt as turned to face Sam. "Stand up," he ordered, his voice hard and unforgiving, "and strip that ass bare."

Chapter 5

HE'S teasing you, Sam tried to reassure himself, but as he sat frozen in his seat, watching Mitch's rigid jaw, it was a hard line to buy. He breathed very shallowly, as if to keep from being noticed by too much movement. After a minute or so, his hand began to hurt, and he realized it hurt because he'd been holding the seat belt strap so tightly it was cutting into his skin.

"You remember your word?" Mitch asked. When Sam kept blinking, he added, "Your *safe* word?" Sam nodded. So did Mitch. "Okay." He pointed at Sam. "Get your ass out of that chair and over my knee."

No! Sam wanted to shout, but he couldn't, and what was weirder, he found that he was undoing his seat belt and climbing out of his chair. But he didn't head out the door. Instead he stumbled around the console in the middle and headed for Mitch, moving as if he were in a dream.

"Take off your pants." Mitch reached out and tugged at Sam's T-shirt. "This too. Take it all off. Right now, Sunshine. *Do it.*"

Sam had been ready to argue, out loud this time, until the "do it." For some reason that made him reach for the hem of his shirt, pull it off, and toss it onto the passenger seat. He fumbled a little with the fastenings of his jeans because Mitch was staring at his waist, and the look made all Sam's blood run south. But when he pushed his jeans and underwear down and his iPhone started to tumble out of his pocket, it was Mitch who leaned forward and both steadied him and caught the phone in one motion. He put Judy into a small compartment in the dash

before turning back to Sam and nodding at his jeans. "All the way off. Socks too."

Sam undressed, his cock hardening as he did so, which amazed him because his heart was pounding and a very, very large part of him wanted to run. This was beyond stupid now. This was crazy. But oh God, it was the most sexy thing he'd ever done in his life. *And he'll stop if I say the word.*

Or would he?

Hesitating with his sock in his hand, Sam looked Mitch in the eye.

"Violet," he whispered.

Immediately, Mitch softened and reached out to touch his arm. "Too fast, Sunshine?"

Sam let out a breath and shook his head, feeling like a two-ton weight had just come off his chest. "Just testing," he confessed.

Mitch stayed where he was, watching Sam's face. "So you want to keep playing? Because we don't have to, if you don't want to. It's okay. We can go slow."

"I don't want to go slow," Sam said.

Mitch's mouth turned up in one corner. "You're ready to take your punishment?" Sam nodded. "You want me to spank you, Sam, for saying you were stupid?"

Sam hesitated. Then he nodded again.

"Say it," Mitch said. "Tell me what you want."

Sam did not want to say it. He just wanted it to happen to him, but even as he thought that, he realized it wasn't fair. He swallowed and tried to hold his head high. "I—I want you to… to spank me," he said quietly. "Because I'm stupid."

Mitch made a low sound in the back of his throat that sounded disturbingly like a growl, and the next thing Sam knew, he was pitching forward toward the dash. He stopped at the last second, his arms braced against the panel of instrument readings or whatever they were, a knee on his stomach and another under his thigh. His bare ass was sticking high in the air.

"Say that again," Mitch said, his voice tight and angry. "Tell me that you're stupid."

"I'm stupid," Sam shot back without hesitation and more than a little sass.

Mitch spanked him.

It was no gentle tap, but rather, it was a hard, smart *slap* against Sam's bare buttocks, and it came with an accompanying smacking sound that echoed loudly in the cab. Sam cried out, the sound half-recovery and half-outrage, and he tried to wriggle away.

Mitch held him in place and spanked him again.

The sting from the first blow was just starting to radiate, and when the second one came down, it amplified the first, so that when the third one came down, Sam was working even harder to get away. But the harder he struggled, the more firmly Mitch held him down, and by the time Mitch finished the seventh slap, Sam had learned to hold still, and brace, and breathe.

After the tenth slap, Mitch stopped and rested his palm against the globe of Sam's now acutely smarting ass. "Would you care to say it again?"

No, Sam would not, because he did not want to get hit again! But there was a tightness inside him now, an anger fueled by all the hurt and shame and confusion he'd felt all day, and it made him—well, stupid. "Yes," he snarled. "Because I am. I'm *stupid.* I'm stupid, stupid, stupid, *stupid—ah!*"

The spanking had begun again, and this time it hurt from the very start, and more than just a little sting. *Violet,* Sam thought, but even as part of him wanted to end this, the part that was driving only cried out—and in a move that made him feel utterly, utterly like a whore—he arched his ass up higher toward the striking palm. This time by the tenth strike Sam's ass was on fire, but the burn was spreading, and his cries had begun to sound more like moans.

"And now?" Mitch asked, as calmly as you please. But Sam could feel Mitch's own erection poking at Sam through the jeans that pressed into his side. He was enjoying this. A lot. If he was a whore, Mitch was too.

Good.

Sam shuddered. "I'm stupid," he whispered, scared now, but of himself, not Mitch. "I'm so stupid." He shut his eyes. "And I'm a whore. I'm a slut, and a whore, just like she says."

Mitch's laugh was a shiver of dark pleasure. "Oh, but Sunshine, those are two very different things. You aren't stupid." Sam felt a finger slide down the tingling crack between his cheeks, and he gasped as Mitch's hand closed gently around his balls. "But you can be as slutty and whorish as you want to be, and it will never make you stupid."

Sam's arms had been rigid against the dash, but when Mitch stroked him, they began to feel slack and weak. He leaned his head against his own arm. "I do stupid things when I'm slutty," he whispered.

"You're awfully slutty right now with your bare ass all red while you hump my hand. You can make this stop any time, but you don't. You're running off with me to God knows where, and you all but begged me to make you my little sex toy on the way. Do you think that makes you a whore, Sam?"

Sam was, indeed, humping into Mitch's hand, because it had slid up and was stroking his cock. "Yes."

"Do you like being my whore, Sam?"

Lust, hot and thick, shot through Sam's body. "Yes."

"Are you stupid, Sam?"

Sam hesitated.

Mitch's finger slid up again, pressing gently up against Sam's anus. "I'm enjoying this, Sam. I'm feeling pretty slutty myself. Am I stupid?"

"No!" Sam replied, no hesitation at all.

"Turn your head to the right," Mitch said, and Sam did. Mitch pressed his fingers gently against Sam's lips. "Open," he commanded, and Sam complied again, opening his mouth like a baby bird, shuddering when Mitch slipped two fingers inside. "Suck," he said, and Sam did, shutting his eyes as he remembered the last time Mitch had ordered him to do this. Except then Mitch had been so far away. Now he was right here.

And these were *Mitch's* fingers.

Sam suckled hard, running his tongue around Mitch's fingers, knowing very well where they were going to end up, and he wanted it, oh *God* but he wanted it. Slutty? Whorish? He could give Lady Gaga a run for her money. And he loved it. He didn't feel dirty, at least not in a bad way. Nobody was going to catch him, and if they did, he didn't give a damn. He had, as Mitch had pointed out, nothing to lose.

Mitch pulled his fingers free, and Sam put his head down, spreading his legs without being asked, his cock aching at the thought of what was about to happen. But though Mitch's finger pushed against his entrance again, he didn't enter.

"Are you stupid, Sam?"

It's a game, the still-functional part of Sam's brain warned him. *A test. If you say yes, he'll smack you again. If you say no, he will stick those beautifully wet fingers up your ass.* Sam wanted the fingers. He'd lie if he had to, to get those fingers. But apparently the part of him willing to lie was the same part that had wanted to run, because it still wasn't driving.

"I don't know," he whispered.

He felt the leg beneath his belly shift, but instead of a spanking, he felt the brush of Mitch's day-old beard and a faint, damp brush of lips against his spine. It made him shiver, and it made him soft, too, bending his shoulders forward, loosening everything that had braced for the invasion. Even his erection let go, just a touch.

Slowly, Mitch's finger pushed inside him.

Sam pushed back against it even as he loosened himself—he'd gotten very good at this part with Darin, who rarely took any time to prepare him at all, and he'd been forced to learn how to ease an entry or be ripped apart. Or go without sex, and given the three options, it had seemed best to learn how to open himself so well the Titanic could have entered him. All this was unknown to Mitch, of course. Sam could feel his surprise and his pleasure as he added as second finger and finally a third. With just spit for lube, it was a bit tricky, Sam had to admit. But if he had any skills in bed, this was his best, so he forced himself to relax further, pushing his ass up, impaling himself on Mitch's fingers.

Mitch groaned, and so did he. Then Mitch's fingers began to move, and Sam let himself fly away.

Within a few minutes he was gasping and crying out, but he was also losing his grip on the dash. Mitch tried to hold him up for awhile, but then he swore, and the next thing Sam knew, he was being turned over with Mitch's fingers still inside him. He marveled at this shift for a second, trying to figure out how the hell Mitch had done it, but when the fingers started fucking him again, he was lucky to remember to breathe.

Mitch was supporting him still, but now he was able to cradle Sam into the crook of his shoulder and his elbow as Sam melted, holding him up while his head lolled. Sam's right leg had been thrown over Mitch's business arm, and Sam had his foot braced against the back of the driver's side headrest, which also managed to expose him to Mitch's fingers at Maximum Slut angle. Or, at least he'd thought so. But after flailing with his left leg, which couldn't hang to the floor and couldn't get purchase on the edge of the seat or Mitch's knee, he kicked it up in the air and back, and Mitch grabbed his calf with his left hand, and then, by God, he was well and truly trussed. Slut City, and his ass was the busy intersection.

It was fucking glorious.

"Open your eyes and watch," Mitch whispered, and by his command, Sam did, lifting his head groggily and staring through the sexual haze at his own exposed body. He was a sea of white flesh across Mitch's jeans, except for his cock, which was bulging and red—almost purple now, actually, and the dark nest of hair that surrounded it. And at his apex, Mitch's hand, large and strong and framed by the blond fur on his arm, was pushing up against him, pounding three of his fingers over and over again inside of Sam.

"Oh God," Sam whispered, his hand sliding down to his cock, trembling as he took himself in hand. "*Oh God.*"

"You're so hot, Sunshine," Mitch said against Sam's ear, his teeth grazing his lobe. "Inside and out. Hot and tight. Come for me, Sam. Come now, right now, hot and naked in my arms. Come on, sugar. Come on. Come on. Come on."

Sam didn't know how to categorize the sounds he was making now—cries, grunts, and something more. Something guttural but oddly musical. He did feel like he was singing, a strange surreal song that only he and Mitch could understand. He felt the pressure building up

inside him, not just in his groin but in the back of his brain. Just before he came, he felt the explosion inside himself, and he turned his face into Mitch's chest, burrowing into his neck. When he came, he bucked, hard, almost launching himself out of Mitch's arms, but Mitch held him down, and he held himself in place by sucking hard against the side of Mitch's neck. When it was over he let go, both of his now very sticky cock and Mitch's throat. He saw the red, angry mark he'd made there. He felt the warm semen running over his fingers, his stomach, and his thigh.

Sam sagged against his lover, spent and sated.

Mitch's laugh was a rumble that reverberated in his chest. "Feel better?"

Sam managed, just barely, to grunt.

Mitch laughed again, and the next thing Sam knew the world was sort of tilting as Mitch stood and carried Sam through the curtain and into the back of the cab.

Sam only vaguely remembered what things had looked like back here, and he wasn't really enlightened now as Mitch moved around in the dark, shifting Sam in his arms as he pushed and pulled at things and at one point appeared to be tugging at part of the wall. All Sam knew was that just when he had the strength to suggest Mitch put him down, Mitch was already doing it, placing Sam with some tenderness into softness that felt very much like a bed.

"If I'd have known I was picking you up, I'd have washed the sheets," Mitch said.

Sam looked up at the trucker in the dark. His backside was still throbbing, and his dick was purring, sending waves of contentment through the rest of his body. He watched Mitch move in the darkness to the other side of the cab, where he first washied his hands and then wet a cloth, which he brought over to Sam to clean him too. Sam just lay there, letting him, too blown away to do anything else.

"I gotta drive us on aways into Nebraska." Mitch reached up and stroked Sam's hair. "You okay? You sure?"

Sam leaned a little into Mitch's stroking fingers. "Yeah. I'm sure."

Mitch's fingers tousled Sam's hair affectionately before lifting away. "You go on and sleep. You look like you could use about eighty winks at least."

Sam didn't know what to say. Despite his Grand High Slut performance, he was too shy to tell Mitch what a great lay that had been. Mitch hadn't even gotten off—that had all been for Sam, apparently. Too moved to do anything else, Sam turned his head and placed a soft kiss on the inside of Mitch's wrist.

Mitch's hand trembled, and he stroked Sam's lips with his index finger—which smelled like musk and soap—before pulling away.

"Good night, Sunshine."

Sam watched him go back through the curtain, and as the truck rumbled back to life again and Sam slipped into the darkness of sleep, he prayed he wouldn't wake to find out this was nothing but a dream.

THERE was no forgetting for Sam, however, that he was indeed running away with Mitch. After a few hours of deep sleep, he woke and found himself still stowed in Mitch's bunk, and after that he wandered in and out of slumber, dreaming strange dreams he couldn't recall once he woke, tucked naked into the narrow bed with the diesel engine rumbling all around him. But very late into the night, he dreamed Aunt Delia was screaming at him and chucking bananas against his bright blue umbrella while he shouted "Violet!" back at her, and then the dream was gone, the engine had stopped, and a large, warm, Mitch-scented body was climbing into bed beside him.

The bed was narrow, and Mitch was a large man—by rights they shouldn't have fit at all, but Mitch maneuvered them into place, and soon Sam was nuzzled against Mitch's naked back, his own pressed hard against the rear wall of the cab as Mitch reached behind to tuck the blanket around them. Mitch fell asleep without so much as a word, and after a few minutes, Sam joined him.

He woke in the morning with his head on Mitch's shoulder, his leg thrown over Mitch's body, his arm around Mitch's waist. Mitch's left arm was wrapped around him and holding him close, and his hand was resting on Sam's bare ass. His other arm lay across Sam's own.

Sam had never been this close to anyone, ever, except for Emma and his mother, and never, not even once, had he lain like this with a man. Darin had fucked him but never held him, and while his few forays to clubs had gleaned a few close-held dances, never had anyone wrapped their arms around him and simply kept still, let alone slept. Lying tangled like this with Mitch was something new. This embrace was more than the lost shelter of his mother, more than the familiar reassurance of Emma, more, even, than the erotic whispers of his fantasies. More what, he didn't know. All he knew was that being held by a man transcended all those other embraces, taking him to a place so pure and wonderful that Sam knew he would do just about anything to make this happen again, and again, and again.

Especially when Mitch stirred, groaned, and slid his hand up over Sam's shoulder to sleepily tousle his hair.

"Mornin', Sunshine," he murmured. He groaned again, and his hand fell away from Sam to land on his own hip as if it were just too heavy to hold up any longer. "Time is it?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted, but Mitch was already lifting a watch from the floor beside him and looking at it.

"Six thirty," Mitch said with regret. "Time to rise and shine." He pressed a quick kiss on Sam's forehead. "Get dressed, Sam, and I'll feed you."

Mitch untangled himself from the sheet and got out of bed, and Sam indulged in a moment's regret that they weren't going to start the day with more sex. But on the heels of that came the realization that he was, in fact, starving. He hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before, and as soon as he was aware of this, it was all he could think about; he rose from the bed as well to hunt down his clothes.

The cab had been dark when he stood, but all of a sudden it was full of bright morning light as Mitch pulled back the curtains separating the sleeping area and what Sam decided to call, for lack of a better term, the cockpit. This place in the back was not just a bedroom, though: it was also the kitchen area, and when Mitch stepped inside a space hidden behind a tall and narrow door, Sam realized it was also a bathroom. There was also a sink, a fridge, and a microwave, and a TV. As he fished his underwear and jeans from the floor, he craned his neck around and saw that he'd been right in his assessment that night he'd

walked Mitch back to the truck stop: he really did have an RV back here.

Sam eventually found all of his clothes and started climbing back into them. He dismissed the day-old underwear, and after a moment's debate and glance at his backpack on the other side of the cab, decided to go commando. It wasn't something he did usually, and his jeans felt odd as they brushed against his bare ass. He was extremely careful about zipping, and he finished just as Mitch came back out of the bathroom.

"Your turn," Mitch said, pointing behind him, "or you can wait until we get inside. I'm due to change it before we take off, and I'll fill the shower, too, after we clean up."

"I'll go when we're inside, if that's okay." He was feeling self-conscious just now and wasn't sure he could pee with Mitch just on the other side of the door. He felt even more self-conscious when he glanced at Mitch's neck and saw the bright red hickey there—a hickey Sam had given him and that Mitch seemed to show no interest in hiding. Sam stuffed his hands into his pockets, feeling suddenly sheepish.

Mitch wasn't, and he smiled before heading back to the front of the cab to climb back out the driver's side door. Sam hung back, not sure if he should follow or use the passenger side door until Mitch waved him forward. He helped him down, and Sam felt a thrill when Mitch didn't just assist him but indulged in a little subtle groping as well.

"How's your ankle?" Mitch asked.

Sam had forgotten about it, which he thought was a good sign. He took a few steps, and outside of a faint twinge, it was perfectly fine. "It's good."

Mitch nodded and skimmed his hand down Sam's back before nodding at a long building across the parking lot. "Come on."

They were at a truck stop again, and this one looked large enough to be considered a small village. They were parked in what could only be described as a sea of semis, and all around them were canopies for fueling stations, garages advertising repair, and others which might have been warehouses. Then there was the "mall." Several fast food

companies had logos on the outside, but there was also a bold yellow sign that said RESTAURANT, and it was here that Mitch was heading.

"Where are we?" Sam asked, catching up to him. He caught sight of himself in the reflection of a semi's chrome fender and hurried his fingers through his hair. "Colorado?"

"Not quite," Mitch said. "I was getting too tired to push over the border. We're in North Platte, Nebraska."

Sam didn't know where that was, exactly, but he knew it had to be farther than Omaha, so this was foreign territory to him. He craned his neck around the sides of trailers, trying to catch a glimpse of the landscape, but so far it looked just like Iowa.

"Bathroom is just down that way," Mitch said, nodding to his right as he headed left toward the hostess stand of the restaurant. "You want me to order you some coffee to get started?"

"Sure, thanks," Sam said, and he hurried away. His need hadn't felt that urgent when he was in the cab, but now that he'd not just stood but trotted across a parking lot, the need to piss was rather acute.

The urinals were crowded with men who looked larger, dirtier, and grimmer than Sam felt like facing, so he took a stall instead, and as he took care of business in the confines of that space, he let himself dwell briefly on the strange turn his life had taken.

This could, he reasoned with himself, be a very good thing. He trotted out all Mitch's arguments again, even adding one of his own: on this trip, he could really be himself for once. He could do anything he wanted, within legalities and reason, and no one was going to talk about it at the bank or, more importantly, bring it back to the makeup counter at Biehl's. He could slut out all he wanted with Mitch, anywhere and anytime, and he wouldn't be judged. Even if someone gave him trouble along the way—well, they'd move on just as quickly, wouldn't they? This little segue from real life was going to be nothing but win.

Sam smiled and headed back out of the bathroom.

He went a little nervously, aware that the sort of mental declaration he'd just made was an invitation for the universe to sic some big badass biker on him or worse, but outside of a few looks—some appreciative, some derisive—he made it into the restaurant and to Mitch's table without any incident of note.

Mitch glanced up at him from the newspaper spread over the table, smiled briefly, and continued reading.

"Their eggs are a little funny here, but if you get them in an omelet you don't notice so much," Mitch suggested. He looked up long enough to nudge a menu at Sam. "Eat up, though, because it's nothing but snacks until we're done unloading in Denver."

"What are you hauling, anyway?" Sam asked, opening a menu.

"Scrap metal, though it's an odd kind. This guy in Chicago collects it, and this guy in Denver buys it and turns it into recycled stuff. They have some arrangement going, and I got in on it. They're one of my bridge legs from Midwest to west." His finger was sliding down a column, and he smiled to himself and tapped a small square of text. "And I think I may have just found the next leg. Order for me, will you?" he said, pointing to an item on Sam's menu before reaching into his pocket for a small cell phone. "I'm going to try and get us a load for Old Blue."

"Old Blue?" Sam repeated, arching his eyebrow over the top of his menu. *Order what?*

"My truck." Mitch gave him a wry grin. "You name your toys, and I name mine."

Sam smiled back, then turned back to his menu, because he was seriously going to expire if he didn't eat something very, very soon. As he scanned the menu, he listened as Mitch made a call, chatting amiably with someone on the other line, sometimes drifting into Spanish. He didn't so much as pause when the waitress came.

The waitress, Sam noticed, was looking at them funny.

"Hi," Sam said brightly, trying to diffuse whatever had upset her. He pointed to the menu. "I'll have number three, and an orange juice." He glanced at Mitch and bit his lip. "I forgot what it was he said he wanted."

Now the waitress didn't just look funny—she looked like she'd bitten into a lemon. "I know what *that one* wants," she said, folded her pad, and turned away.

Sam frowned at her, wondering what crawled up her ass and died. He glanced at Mitch, wanting to share a shrug to diffuse her attitude. To his surprise he saw Mitch watching her retreating back, looking red-

faced. And guilty. He didn't look angry, or even affronted, just guilty, especially when his eyes darted to Sam.

He cleared his throat and looked down at the newspaper again as he resumed his conversation.

Deciding whatever it was wasn't worth worrying over, Sam did a quick survey of the restaurant. There were a lot of people there, mostly men, but there were some women too. There were two families, but they were very closed off, dealing only with themselves. None of the women were alone, sitting instead with men who seemed to either have ball caps with unruly hair sticking out the back or big bushy beards, or both. Almost everyone in the room was overweight.

No one smiled, either, which seemed odd to Sam. Everyone looked grim, solitarily eating their breakfast or conversing seriously at the counter or urging children to eat up so they could get back on the road. Some of the other truckers were looking at Sam the same way the waitress had, and it was starting to irritate him. He glanced down at himself, but no, he wasn't flaming out or anything. He didn't necessarily *look* gay, no more than usual. And he and Mitch were just sitting here, not even touching hands.

I know what that one wants. Sam caught the waitress's eye as she came back through. The look she gave him was decidedly dirty and clearly homophobic.

Sam rolled his eyes. *Stupid rednecks.* He vowed not to think of them anymore.

Mitch was charming up whoever he was speaking to, promising them "Si, I can do that, no hay problema," and mentioning figures in what was clearly some sort of negotiation. It went on for a long time, meandering in and out of chat before Mitch mentioned again that he could really do anything they needed, and at last, he hung up.

"Maybe," he said, to himself or to Sam it wasn't clear. He cupped his hands around his coffee. "They're cutting back like everyone else. So I lowered my rate, and then I lowered it again. They're going to call and check on a few things, so hopefully it works out."

"What is it?" Sam asked, now dying to know.

"A custom fencing company in Cortez," Mitch replied. "I used to carry parts to and from them regular, but they've stopped calling, and they switched to another, cheaper carrier." He pointed to the paper.

"But then I saw that company just went out of business, so I called the fencing place up to try and win them back. It will just barely cover gas, the offer I floated to them, and they never have a full load. But I might be able to get a long load for Phoenix from Denver. Maybe." He rubbed his chin. Abruptly his face shuttered, and Sam followed his gaze to see the waitress coming toward them with a serving tray. "Ah-ha—here's food. Good, because now more than ever, we need to get going."

The waitress behaved this time, possibly because Mitch was giving off some serious fuck-off vibes. Sam wanted to ask more questions, but Mitch was shoveling food into his mouth, so Sam said nothing and ate as well, as much as he could. He didn't finish, and when Mitch pressed him to eat more, Sam held up his hands.

"I warn you, it will be a long time before another sit down." Mitch reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet and handed Sam a pair of twenties. "Go on to the other side and get some snacks. I'm out of everything, so get what you like: just grab me a big liter thing of water, a bag of whatever pepper jerky they got, and a pack of Winstons."

"Winstons?" Sam repeated, taking the twenties.

"Cigarettes." Mitch threw more bills on the table and rose. "I'm gonna go dump Old Blue's toilet and refill the water and gas and such. Sorry, but we're gonna have to skip showers this morning. You can catch one on the road if you like."

"Okay," Sam said, standing there with the twenties in his hand, feeling slightly foolish as he watched Mitch stride purposefully down the aisle of the restaurant to the outside door.

He wandered over to the convenience store at the other end of the hall from the bathrooms, trying to remember the list Mitch had given him. Cigarettes he remembered, but he'd get those last because they were behind the counter. Funny, he hadn't seen Mitch smoke. It depressed him a little, but he told himself to get over it. He got the jerky and the water, and he wandered around trying to decide what else Mitch might want, or what he would like himself, but mostly he just got distracted.

Sam had been to a few truck stops, but not many, and never one like this; it was as if he were stepping into an alternate universe. The convenience store was almost a Walmart—you name it; this place had

it. It had a lot of souvenirs, too, mementos of Nebraska which just seemed weird to Sam, but there were other things that were just out and out odd. There were clocks made from segments of trees, varnished and with a painting of Elvis or Reba McEntire on the face. There was a lot of stylized Native American stuff, and there was an odd abundance of paintings of wolves. There were a lot of kitschy decorative pieces in glass and ceramic and crystal, figurines of fairies and unicorns, cute little boys and girls kissing, and cows and pigs playing poker.

And then there were the butt buckets.

At first Sam had thought they were some sort of gay joke, but no, they were serious: the thing was a container for your cigarette butts which also extinguished them or something. There was a spit bucket, too, and Sam had to turn away from the container that looked very suspiciously like something you were supposed to pee in.

There were political stickers, and a lot of American-themed items, and along a wall in the back there was a selection of porn that would have made Darin weep. Portable DVD players were for sale behind a high shelf, and others were available for rent. There were CB radios too, and Sam wondered if Mitch had one.

Eventually Sam tore himself away from the cabinets of oddity and forced himself to shop. He got a couple more funny looks from truckers, but he ignored them the same way he ignored the funny looks he got in Middleton. He ended up at the cash register with a bag of Cheetos, a few microwavable meals in tins, a half gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, and a jar of peanut butter. He did a few more searches in vain for mineral or sparkling water, settled for something flavored instead, and checked out.

Mitch had Old Blue parked in a new place and had the hood open on the cab. Actually there was no hood, but the whole front of the truck was angled forward in a way that made Sam think of a cracked nut. Mitch was engrossed in his work, so after a quick ogle of his ass, Sam slipped quietly into the cab, put away the groceries, and sat down on the unmade bed. Then he tried to decide what to do.

He got out his backpack and put on underwear to start, and then he applied some deodorant. He brushed his teeth at the sink, and he made the bed. He poked around in the cupboards for a moment, hoping for something dirty or interesting, but mostly he found Mitch's clothes,

a bag of kitty litter (which made no sense at all), and a lot of papers. He found a DVD player in one cupboard, and on top of it he found several very hard-core porn videos.

He took a moment to examine them, heart pounding as he got this tiny peek into Mitch's sexual world. There were several twink videos, and some "college boy" themed ones too. The underlying theme, though, was bondage and domination. And threesomes, or more.

Well.

Sam closed the cupboard, feeling rather hard and slightly nervous, and he continued on his search. He found a very old laptop, and an emergency flare, and most important of all, an outlet. Sam grabbed his backpack and fished inside for the cord to his iPhone. It was buried, though, far more deeply than his underwear, and he was afraid he'd left it behind when he finally felt the cord. He also found, deep inside the canvas, the plastic container he'd buried at the bottom of the pack.

Sam sat down on the floor, leaned against the cabinet, and very carefully fished the cord and the container out.

For a few minutes he just sat with his mother's ashes, holding the container in his lap and stroking the top of the lid. *You didn't leave everything behind,* he scolded himself, and the little voice was right. He turned the tail of the iPhone cord over in his hand, realizing that in this day and age you couldn't fully run away, not really. Delia wouldn't be upset, not yet, not any more than normal. She'd think he was out. She'd still be angry. Em would be worried, but not frantic. Not yet. But by the end of the day, they would both start to worry, and when they inevitably crossed paths and realized neither of them had seen him—then things would get interesting.

Sam cradled the container of ashes higher on his chest, leaned over it, and sighed.

What he wanted, he admitted, was to have an adventure peppered with almost nothing except what he'd had with Mitch last night. He wanted a James Lear novel: near to constant episodes of sexual encounters strung together with just a bit of mystery, and maybe, for window dressing, some self-discovery. He wanted to have woken up this morning to Mitch suggesting sex. He wanted to have sex now. He wanted to be coerced into strange sexual acts with him while on the road for the benefit of passing drivers who would also be gay, and

should their escapades lead to encounters at rest stops, all their witnesses would be disease free. He wanted a fantasy, in short. He wanted escape.

That was what Mitch had sold him, yes, but maybe that had just been a game last night, and Mitch was bored already because Sam was too tame. He tried to tell himself that Mitch was just doing actual work today and that there would be sex later, but that actually upset him more. He wanted to be Mitch's little sex toy, yes, but he wanted to be so irresistible that Mitch did little else but him. He didn't want to wait patiently in the passenger seat until Mitch had a free moment. What sort of adventure was just following him around, fetching groceries? Was this all it was going to be?

God, he sounded like he was four years old. He was nothing but an ungrateful bastard. He should just go home, if he was going to behave like this.

He opened the lid to the ashes with a trembling hand and stared down into them, and when a tear surprised him by rolling down his nose, he let it fall into the gray silt.

"Mom," he whispered, "I know he said not to say it, but I feel really stupid."

He wished—oh God, he wished that some soft breeze would blow up from nowhere, or that he would feel a warm touch. *Just a tiny bit of magic*, he pleaded to the ashes. He prodded them gently with his finger, as if this would spur something. *Anything. Something to let me know you're really here.*

Nothing happened.

When the door opened, Sam startled, almost spilling the ashes—he did lose just a few, but he scooped them up and put them back into the container as best he could. He found a few still on the floor once he closed the container, though, and he worked to gather them into his fist as Mitch stuck his head around the driver's seat.

"Hey—you said you never been to Nebraska, right?" When Sam nodded, Mitch grinned and jerked his head toward the door. "Come on."

Sam still had the ashes in his hand, but Mitch was watching, so he just clutched at them and hurried out, keeping them tight in his grip as Mitch helped him down again, grope-free this time. But once they were

on the ground, Mitch took hold of his elbow and led him with purposeful step toward a ditch around the back of a maintenance building. But as they cleared some grass, Sam realized it wasn't a ditch at all.

It was a river.

"This is the Platte," Mitch said, gesturing at the water. "Well—okay, this here's the South. Just a bit back east from here is where the North and South Platte meet. They feed into the Missouri River, which in turn empties into the Mississippi." He stood a moment, looking out across the water, and Sam looked up at him, watching his face. He looked pleased. "They followed this river on the Oregon Trail and the Mormon Trail, and the interstate winds along beside it. So when you travel down this road, you're going the same way so many people went before you, all heading west, to hope."

Sam turned his gaze back to the river, not knowing quite what to say to this. It was a pretty speech, but it seemed odd coming from take-your-pants-off-and-bend-over Mitch, and he didn't know why Mitch was delivering it to him. So he just stared at the water, and he found, actually, that the river was very soothing. He could hear the noise of the truck stop behind him, and the interstate beyond, but here at the river he could hear birds, too, and the whisper of a breeze in the grass, and the soft sound of the water as it wound its way slowly to the Gulf of Mexico. Something small eased inside Sam, like a drop of water on a hot day, but for that moment, it was enough.

He remembered the ashes still in his hand, and before he could think too long about what he was doing, he extended his arm, opened his palm, and let them go, watching the powder drift down into the weeds and into the water. The ease he'd felt vanished with that release, though, and he wrapped his arms around himself, wondering what the hell he'd done that for.

Mitch's shadow fell over him, and he felt a brief touch on his shoulder. "Ready to go, Sunshine?"

No, Sam wasn't ready. He didn't want to keep going, because he felt awkward and ridiculous, and he was sure he was going to regret his impulsive decision to run. But he looked out at the water, imagined that small bit of his mother now sailing south, and said, "Sure."

THEY reached Denver by early afternoon.

Sam enjoyed the drive. Mitch let him pick all the music, and after starting with safe pop artists he eventually wandered into more of his favorite British indie bands and on into country. And after Mitch seemed to genuinely like everything he played, he just put it on shuffle and let the wild, weird eclecticism that was his musical taste carry them westward.

Sam settled back in his seat with his feet on the dash, watching the landscape change from the river valley of North Platte to the scrubby plains of eastern Colorado to the Rocky Mountains rising before him like gods lifting their heads on the horizon. At first Mitch had had to point them out to him; Sam had been too focused on the landscape, wondering where the hell all the trees had gone, and it took him several seconds to realize the dark shapes ahead were not all clouds.

"Cool," he'd said, but he felt a little let down. He'd thought somehow the mountains would be bigger. But as he watched, they did grow, slowly—and then he got out a map, because he would have thought they'd be in Denver by now, if the mountains were that close. And that was when he realized how very far the mountains still were away.

"*Shit!*" he said, looking up again, this time with his mouth hanging open.

Mitch smiled. "That was the reaction I was looking for. Now imagine you're in a covered wagon and you've been traveling for weeks."

Fuck, Sam thought, and sank back into his seat. "I would be staying in Denver, thanks."

"And now you know why Denver is there," Mitch said.

He seemed to be really enjoying himself, and Sam regarded him for a moment, noticing the light in his eyes, the sudden eagerness in his posture. He'd smoked several Winstons on the way into Colorado, looking agitated and almost bored, but now he looked excited, as if he were happy to be where he was going.

"You wouldn't have stopped in Denver, would you?" Sam said. "You'd have hiked over the mountains like Grizzly Adams."

Mitch shrugged, but he was still smiling. "I'm not much of a naturalist, and I have no desire to meet wild animals, so probably not. But I'd have helped lay down the rails and saved up to ride the first train. Mostly I like traveling. Just seeing things. Learning. Watching."

Sam went back to watching the mountains come closer and closer. He could see the snow on the tops of some of the tallest peaks. "Will we drive into them at all?"

"If this deal comes through, yes, to get to Cortez. Quite deep inside them, in fact."

Sam tried to imagine what mountain roads would be like, but he honestly couldn't wrap his head around the idea. He assumed they would drive between the peaks, probably in some winding valley. It would be fun to look up at them from so far below. "I hope you get the deal, then."

The warehouse where Mitch took his load was on the southern side of the city, but it was out in the open, the mountains still visible in the distance. Sam offered to help unload, but Mitch just shooed him back into the cab. "Just sit tight," he said, motioning Sam toward the back. "Sit back and watch some TV. Just stay here."

But Sam didn't want to watch TV. He felt edgy, and bored, and nervous. He pulled out his phone and stared at it. Knowing he had to face it sometime, Sam called home. He started with Emma.

At first she didn't believe him.

"That's funny," she said when he told her he was in Denver. "Seriously, where are you? Your aunt has called me twice."

"No, really," Sam said. "I'm in Denver, with Mitch." And he told her about driving off, about his car dying, and of running to the truck stop. "Actually, I probably need to get my car off the road. Would you mind?"

"What the *fuck!*" Emma sputtered for a few seconds, then swore again. "Sam—you are *seriously* in Denver? You ran off with your alley fuck? *Why?*"

"I was mad. Delia—" He bit his lip, not knowing how to explain this. "She knows about Mitch. What we did in the alley. She said all sorts of crap, Em, and she promised to make my life hell."

"So you ran off with a stranger?"

She made "stranger" sound like "axe murderer." Sam hunched farther into himself. "It just sort of happened. I texted Mitch, and I guess he was close, because he said if I got to the truck stop, he'd pick me up." Okay, this sounded really crazy out loud. His hand tightened on his phone. "So… I went, and…." He gave up. "Emma, don't be mad."

"Mad! Sam, I'm *scared*. Who is this guy? God, am I going to read about how they find your mutilated body in some ditch?"

"He's the guy from the alley! You liked him then!"

"Yeah, when he was a casual fuck—Sam, do you even know anything about him? What if he's some sort of pervert?"

Sam started to say he wasn't, but he remembered the porn and faltered. He was starting to feel awkward, and a little sick, and he didn't like it. "I shouldn't have called."

"Why didn't you call me when this happened?" she demanded, now sounding hurt as well as angry. "I would have taken you in, you idiot!"

"What, forever?" Sam's stomach hurt. "Just forget it, Emma. I'm sorry. I'll be fine."

"Just come home, Sam." She was pleading now. "Get on a plane, and I'll come get you. You can come and stay with me. I'll talk to my mom, and we'll find a way to get the apartment. We'll find you some other job, and we'll find a way to get you tuition for the fall. Just *come home*."

Sam didn't know what to do. He'd felt good today, mostly, but there was that awkwardness from earlier in the morning and the fact that Mitch had yet to so much as wink at him since breakfast, and there was the awkwardness of now, of just sitting here. Should he go back? Was Emma right? He looked out at the mountains, which were starting to look more and more ominous.

"Sam?" Emma said, worriedly, into his ear.

Sam sank back in his chair. "I don't know," he confessed. "I don't know."

"Then come back," Emma said, pouncing on his indecision.

The door to the cab opened, and Sam startled, guiltily. "I gotta go," he said, and he hung up. He turned to face Mitch, ready to explain. But Mitch seemed unconcerned—in fact, he seemed quite happy.

"Sunshine," Mitch drawled, bracing himself the sides of the open door. "Get your dancin' shoes on, because we are going to party. I got the fencing load to Cortez—for my *full* rate."

"Oh?" Sam said, trying to be happy too.

"And I got Fuzzy to lend me his truck, so I can show you around town." He nodded at the curtain. "Go on—get yourself a shower, if you want."

Sam did, so Mitch showed him how to use the shower, and the toilet, which Sam was distracted by for a moment marveling how, really, you could use both at once, if you wanted. He hurried through his ablutions. Mitch apparently *did* wash his hair with bar soap, and Sam had to climb out wet and fish his own shampoo and conditioner out of the backpack. He'd tried to hurry, not wanting to hog the space, but Mitch was leaning against the front fender, smoking and sipping a Mountain Dew when Sam came out, looking unhurried, and so Sam took his time and fussed as much as he could with his limited supplies.

"You look damn fine, Sunshine," Mitch said, narrowing his eyes appreciatively at Sam appeared. He smiled, then stubbed out his cigarette.

Sam smoothed his hand self-consciously over his hair. "I should have packed a blow dryer."

"We'll stop at a Walmart on the way," Mitch promised, squeezing Sam's butt as he came past. "I won't be long, honey, and then we'll go eat. Go on back inside, though."

Sam would rather have stayed outside, because he was tired of being in the cab, but he didn't want to argue, so he followed him in. Mitch wasn't long, technically, but Sam spent the whole time he was in the shower pacing back and forth in the tiny space inside the cab, alternately looking out at the mountains and back east toward home. By the time Mitch came out, *Sam* wanted a cigarette.

He settled into his seat while Mitch dressed, feeling awkward about seeing him nude when he was so uneasy, but he wished he hadn't when Mitch finally appeared. He looked *good*. He looked much the same as he had before, except more scrubbed, and his eyes were bright. He wore cowboy boots, and he had on a cream-colored button down, but his jeans were the same faded blue. Sam's only complaint was that Mitch's hair would look a lot better once it dried and got messed up again. Mitch didn't seem to care, though, and only eagerly herded Sam out of the cab and toward a beat-up brown pickup truck near the side of the warehouse.

They did stop at a Walmart, where Mitch made Sam pick out a hairdryer and more food and drinks too. They didn't have any sparkling water, just the name brand San Pellegrino, which while it was Sam's favorite was not very economical. But when Sam tried to just get one, Mitch put four more in the cart. They poked through the clothes but didn't get anything, and after paying, they were back on I-25 and heading into downtown Denver.

"They have this mall that's closed to all traffic but a shuttle bus, which is nice," Mitch said as he drove Sam down through the tall buildings. "The Mint is here too. They hold a grand prix race through the downtown once a year, though I've never been here for it. And they have the stadiums, of course. Mostly, it's just a nice city. Anywhere in particular you'd like to see?"

"I don't know." Sam rubbed his arms, feeling lost again. It was closer in the pickup truck, and Emma's warnings kept swirling in his head. "Whatever is fine."

"Are you cold?" Mitch asked, and he started to roll up his window.

"I'm fine," Sam said quickly, putting his hands in his lap.

"Hungry? You only had that peanut butter sandwich for lunch."

Sam thought if he tried to eat he would throw up. He thought he might anyway. "No, thank you."

Mitch's concern faded to tension, which was just as well, because Sam wasn't exactly calm. God, he felt so stupid.

After awhile Mitch cleared his throat. "Do you… want me to take you to the airport?"

Sam shut his eyes, hung his head, and drew his knees up onto the seat. “No,” he murmured. *And yes.*

More silence. Sam was dimly aware that they were driving through residential area now, and that it was nice, and that he should be soaking up the experience, not melting into a puddle, but he couldn't help it. God, he should just go. He would feel like a failure forever, but he couldn't do this. He just couldn’t.

“How about,” Mitch said after awhile, “we go somewhere and have a drink?”

“Okay,” Sam agreed, but he kept his body tucked in tight against itself.

Mitch turned the truck around at a boulevard and headed back into the downtown, and all the while Sam sat there with his heart hammering against the inside of his chest. He tried to lose himself in the scenery, to feel a sense of history, and even for awhile to imagine he was on some wagon train, but he kept coming back to how ridiculous he felt, and how childish, and how he wished he were already drunk.

He was momentarily distracted as they parked in front of what could only be a gay bar, given the rainbow signs hanging in the windows, and he felt a little better, thinking it would be nice, for a change, to go into one of these places with a partner. But then he remembered how stupid he was being with Mitch, and he fell back into his awkwardness as he followed Mitch through the door and up to the bar.

“Two tequila shooters,” Mitch said to the bartender. He cocked his head at Sam. “What for a chaser?”

Sam’s head was swimming. “I don’t….” He bit his lip. *So stupid.*

“A beer,” Mitch answered for him, and he picked something random off the tap.

“I’m sorry,” Sam murmured, flattening his hands on the top of the bar so they stopped shaking.

“Drink,” Mitch said, shoving the shooters at him, “and then we’ll talk.”

Sam downed the first tequila shot and gagged. When he’d recovered, Mitch took his hand and turned it over, exposing his wrist.

"You're supposed to lick it," he said. When Sam just stared at him in confusion, Mitch lifted his arm and aimed Sam's wrist at his own mouth. "Lick, Sunshine."

Hesitantly, Sam's tongue stole out to lick his skin. He kept his eyes on Mitch, who was watching him back. When Sam tried to draw back, Mitch shook his head. "More."

Sam licked again, more slowly, and he felt a heat begin to build inside of him, especially when Mitch lowered his arm, salted the wet spot, and brought it back up to Sam's mouth.

"Lick the salt off."

Sam did, making a face all the way until Mitch pressed the second shot glass into his hand.

"Drink."

Sam did, and as he lowered the glass, Mitch was coming at him with a wedge of lime, which he tucked gently into Sam's mouth.

"Suck."

Sam did, shutting his eyes against the tang and the watery way the two shots of tequila were making him feel. When he opened his eyes, Mitch took the lime out of his mouth, pushed his beer at him, and nodded to the bartender and said, "Two more, and a second Coors."

"I can't do two more," Sam protested, but he did so weakly. He was already feeling calmer. Maybe this was the answer: stay drunk.

"One of them is for me." When the bartender brought back the next round, Mitch put one glass in front of Sam and the other in front of himself. Sam watched him lick his own wrist, salt it, lick it again, and by the time he was sucking the lime, Sam was licking his own wrist and reaching for the salt. His cock was pulsing now, not hard, but getting there, and when he chased his lime juice away with a swig of beer, he was feeling much better than he had when he'd come in.

Mitch, though, looked worse. He was staring into his beer and looking grim. "I'm sorry," he said at last.

That threw Sam. "What?"

Mitch took a long drink before answering. "For yesterday. Last night. I went too fast. I tried not to, but I did, didn't I?"

Sam frowned, thinking the tequila must have already made him too fuzzy. “Fast? You mean the spank—” He cut himself off and blushed.

Mitch nodded grimly. “And what came after. I’m sorry if I scared you. I’m trying so hard not to screw this up. You were just so….” His fingers tightened visibly on his glass. “Hot.”

“Scared me?” Sam couldn’t believe this. “No, you didn’t scare me! Not until—” He cut himself off.

“Yes?” Mitch pressed, leaning forward. “When did I scare you?”

Sam was blushing hotly, partly from the alcohol, but mostly from a complete panic over how he was supposed to answer this. He couldn’t very well admit he’d been nervous after Mitch *didn’t* fuck him.

But Mitch was watching him intently, waiting, thinking he’d done something wrong. Clearly he was planning to not jump Sam at all until he figured out how he should be dialing himself back. Sam’s face was beet red now, and he thought the bartender was listening, and maybe another couple on the other side of Mitch.

And yet, if Sam didn’t speak up, he might as well go get on a plane.

“I was scared,” he said in a barely audible whisper, “when you stopped.” He stared down at the top of the bar, into the empty shot glasses. “I thought I’d done something wrong. I probably did.”

Sam’s face felt so hot that it felt distended. He looked up at the bartender, who was boldly watching him, listening and grinning.

“Can I please have more tequila?” Sam asked.

The bartender grinned and nodded, and Sam gripped his beer, let out a sigh, and drained the rest of it.

When he set his glass down, there was another shooter in front of him. Sam looked up and saw the bartender wink. Wincing inwardly, Sam bent over and pressed his forehead to the top of the bar. But he stilled when he felt a gentle touch at the back of his neck, and he shut his eyes and exhaled when he felt the brush of lips against his ear.

“Are you telling me,” Mitch whispered, “that you weren’t scared off, but upset because I didn’t do *more* to you?”

“You know,” Sam said to the top of the bar, “if you just want to have them leave me a bottle and give me a quiet corner, I could just stay here for a few hours, get insanely drunk, and then you could pour me onto a bus.”

“Sunshine.” Fingers slithered through his hair, which felt nice. But the next thing he knew, he was being lifted up by the collar of his T-shirt. He watched his wrist lift from the table, but when Mitch turned it over and applied his own tongue to Sam’s pulse, Sam lost the little air left in his lungs. Sam kept his eyes on Mitch’s as the other man salted Sam’s skin before licking it off. He caught Sam’s finger and thumb as well before drawing away, and he kept their eyes locked as Mitch tipped the shot into his mouth before reaching for a lime. When Mitch sucked hard on the fruit, Sam had to close his eyes, the intensity of the moment and the volume of alcohol in his system more than he could take. When he opened his eyes again, Mitch had tossed the spent lime into the bowl with the others and was pulling his wallet out of his pocket.

“We’re leaving?” Sam said, confused, and a little concerned.

“We’re taking a walk.” Mitch pushed several bills toward the bartender. “We’ll be back.”

“We’ll be waiting for you,” the bartender said as Mitch slid a hand around Sam’s waist and took a good hard hold of his ass.

Chapter 6

SAM sank into Mitch, still nervous, but hopeful, fairly sure there was at least going to be sex now. He was loose enough thanks to the tequila to not care about much else. But Mitch kept them going right past the truck and out of the parking lot onto the street, where his hand shifted to simply hold Sam's arm in a more discreet support. Mitch said nothing, either, not until they were down three streets and angling across to a park, where he aimed them at a bench. Once they were there, he sat down, leaned his elbows on his knees, and stared at the ground. Finally, he spoke.

"So." His fingers rubbed nervously over each other before lacing together to still the nervous movement. "So, I guess we need to talk."

"Okay," Sam said, drunk, lost, and confused.

Mitch held himself rigidly in his posture. He seemed so nervous, and it was odd to watch. "I had it all worked out in my head how I was going to take it nice and slow, and then the next thing I knew I was offering to spank you, and then—my God, Sunshine." He ran a hand over his face.

Sam felt somehow he was missing something important. "That's… okay," he said carefully. "I liked that. It was different, but I liked it."

This did not console Mitch. He was rocking on his heels now, looking like he wanted to vault off the bench, but then he stopped and stared down at his hands as he twined his fingers together between his knees again.

"I told you before that I used to… do stuff. Kinky stuff. And I did. Lots of it. It didn't go well, Sunshine. It ended really badly." He puffed his cheeks full of breath and blew the air out. "I don't want this to end badly too."

Sam didn't, either. But he didn't understand how their being all awkward was going to help. "What happened?" he asked, fairly sure he wasn't going to get an answer.

But to his surprise, he did.

"There's this guy," Mitch said slowly. Reluctantly. "The one you remind me of. We used to… do things. We traveled together." His fingers tangled again. "We were real good friends, but we fucked it up. Bad. And we did it by letting games get away from us."

The "little bastard." It had to be. Sam didn't know who this guy was, but he knew he didn't like him, because whoever he was, he not only clearly had Mitch's heart, but he'd made sure it was way out of Sam's reach. Sam fidgeted. "I don't get what you're trying to say, Mitch. Do you want me or not?"

"I want you," Mitch said, "but I don't want to screw it up. I don't want to scare you."

Sam felt like he was walking on very thin ice. There was something he was missing here, and if he didn't get a handle on it, he was going to go under. "So what is it you think is going to scare me?"

Mitch laughed, bitterly. "Sam, this isn't going to work."

Sam didn't know if he meant this conversation or this relationship. "Just tell me," he pleaded.

Mitch's expression was both wooden and tortured. "Sam, I was good all day and you were skittish."

"But that was *why* I was skittish! I thought you were going to have me fuck myself with a dildo while you drove, and then you just sat there and smoked and told me about the goddamned river!" Mitch's eyes flickered with heat, and Sam's heart kicked a little. "*Would* you have wanted me to fuck myself with a dildo?"

"That would have been a little distracting," Mitch admitted, but his voice was husky.

"Then what would you have done, if you hadn't been 'being good'?" Sam asked.

Mitch tapped his thumb against his leg, and when he spoke, it was very careful and deliberate. “I wanted to fuck you when I woke up. I wanted to turn you over and lick you, and eat you out, and I wanted to fuck your mouth.”

Sam was feeling hot again, but in a very different way. “Well, you should have!”

“But I also wanted to tie you down, and spank you. I wanted to make you squirm, and groan, and then I felt you stroking my chest, and I thought, don’t fuck this up.”

“Mitch, this doesn’t make any *sense*! I know I must just be stupid, but I don’t *get it!*” Sam cried. Then he gasped as Mitch turned and grabbed him roughly by the shoulders.

“Sam,” he said dangerously, “I have fucked up every relationship I’ve ever been in. I tried so many times, but he always got in the way, and he was *right*, but I keep hoping with you—” He cut himself off and shook his head. “If you *were* stupid, if you *were* just some idiot twink I didn’t care about, I would seduce you and fuck you all the way to Los Angeles. And I would take you to sex clubs and tie you up to the bed while I drove and fuck you with a vibrating plug until you begged me to pull over and fuck you. I would make you kneel on the floor and I would fuck your mouth and pull your hair back so I could watch.”

Sam’s head was swimming with the erotic scenes Mitch painted, and he couldn’t for the life of him imagine why Mitch thought they were bad. But Mitch kept talking, and then Sam began to understand.

“I would fuck you until we were bored, and then I’d let you go. But I *like* you. And I don’t want to fuck it up. And I would—I would *fuck it up,* Sam, because I always do. It’s like once you put sex into the picture, I don’t know how to behave.”

He looked so nervous, so scared, so un-Mitch, and between this and the tequila the world was spinning. Sam could feel the threads between himself and Mitch stretching, ready to break. He knew he needed to do something, but in his own way, he was as fragile as Mitch.

And God, but Sam was turned on. *I would make you kneel on the floor, and I would fuck your mouth and pull your hair back so I could watch.* He shivered, reaching out to lay a hand on Mitch’s thigh. But he didn’t—couldn’t—look him in the face while he spoke.

“So you can either be my friend, or my lover, but not both?”

Mitch's hands clutched at his shoulders. "I don't know, Sunshine. That's just it. *I don't know*."

Sam considered this, trying to find reason when all he wanted to say was "for crying out loud, just fuck me!" Wasn't it *smart* of Mitch to slow down? Shouldn't he be glad? Grateful? What was wrong with him, that all he could feel when Mitch said he was afraid of using and discarding him was that he'd just wish he'd hurry up and do it?

The weirdest part was, he *did* care for Mitch as a friend. He cared for him a lot. Couldn't he just be his traveling buddy?

What the *hell* was wrong with him, that he asked himself that and it took every ounce of control not to clench his hands into fists and scream, "NO!"

Sam's hand, still on Mitch's thigh, kneaded nervously as he spoke.

"I meant what I said last night," he said, hesitant. "I want—I want to feel like a whore. But I'm scared. Not of you. Of me." His hand tightened on Mitch's leg and held it like an anchor. "I found your porn. The ones about twinks and college boys. They looked like me, I thought, and I got all… hot, because I thought, 'I want him to do that to me'. And then I felt slutty, and ashamed. I didn't want you to think of me like that. Well—I *did* want you to think of me like that, but I felt ashamed for wanting it. Like if you did want me that way then you'd just sneer at me and shove me away when it was done, because how could you not?"

"Sunshine." Mitch's hands loosened on Sam's shoulders and one slid up into his hair. "Never, Sunshine. Never."

"Then what's the problem?" Sam tried to look at Mitch, but he couldn't manage it yet, and so he slid his hand up Mitch's side instead, pressing his palm flat against the side of his shirt, feeling his body move as he breathed. "I'd understand if you did that. I know it—" He shut his eyes. "I know it's awful to want that, but I don't… mind, if you have to look at me like that. No, it really is okay," he said hurriedly, when Mitch's hands tightened again. "I mean—it's why I let Darin fuck me and why I sucked Keith off in the bathroom. They aren't really nice, after, but it's okay."

Except as soon as he said that, he knew it wouldn't be, not with Mitch. It was fine with Darin and Keith because they didn't matter.

Mitch mattered.

Mitch leaned forward and pressed a kiss against Sam's forehead. "I will never, ever be disgusted by you, Sam. Ever." It felt like a vow.

Sam shrugged, bowing his head to hide his discomfort. "Then I don't understand what the problem is."

Mitch said nothing, and they spent several minutes in uncomfortable silence. But Mitch kept unconsciously massaging Sam, and it relaxed him, and eventually allowed him to speak.

"I liked last night," Sam said quietly, loosening as Mitch continued to touch him. "I loved what you made me do on the phone that day too. I loved how it made me feel. I loved the trailer. I loved it all. I loved being held down and how you told me to watch. I even liked the spanking. It was weird, but I liked it. Maybe not every day, but maybe… sometimes."

Mitch was nuzzling the top of his head now, and Sam fought against shutting his eyes, realizing for the first time that they were in a public place. No one was really watching, though—people passed, and some glanced at them, but most just looked hurriedly away. And really, their bench was far off the path, so they were more a distant blurry figure than anything.

Sam let his eyes drift shut, and made himself keep speaking.

"The trouble is," he said, his breath catching when Mitch's hand slid over his backside, "I don't know exactly what I want. Like… now. I like this. I'd like it, for example, if you m—" He swallowed before forcing himself on. "Made me undo my pants and touched me. Right here, in the park."

His face was flaming, and he felt almost sick, and it got even worse when Mitch said, "That would very likely get us arrested." But then Mitch squeezed his ass and said, "Unbutton your pants, Sam."

Sam was shaking. "You said—" he whispered, but he stopped when Mitch squeezed him again.

"I said to unbutton your pants."

Eyes wide and scanning for police, Sam reached down and very slowly undid the fastening of his jeans.

"Unzip," Mitch said, "and pull your cock out so I can see it."

Sam didn't have to work much to pull himself out, as he was so fucking hard he was already peeking a little above the elastic. "I thought you said we'd get arrested?"

"If I reached over and started tugging at you, yeah. But this nobody can see." He brushed his lips over Sam's hair. "How you doing, Sunshine?"

"Nervous," Sam admitted. "But… good."

"Nervous why?" Mitch pressed. "Nervous like you don't want to do this?"

"Just… nervous." He looked down at himself. His sex was there, pink and vulnerable, the smooth round head exposed. Sam shivered. "Nervous that you'll think I'm—" He bit his lip and shook his head. He'd been about to say "easy." "I thought it was supposed to be girls that felt like this," he said, hating himself. "I'm so stupid."

"I thought I warned you about calling yourself stupid," Mitch said, his voice a little dangerous.

"Oh," Sam said, and he flushed. Mitch's hand on his backside had stilled, and he pushed into it a little. "More… spanking?"

"I don't know. That didn't seem to teach you much." Mitch's hand slid up and dipped inside his waistband. "But we'll deal with that in a minute. I'm thinking someone told you sex was slutty and that slutty is bad. And I don't think you have to be a girl to feel that way. Your parents tell you this?"

"No," Sam said quickly and with passion. "Well—I don't know who my dad is. Mom—" He stopped, trying to figure out how to explain his mom without making her sound bad. "She just wanted me to be happy. She's not against sex, but she didn't want what happened to her to happen to me. She wasn't married when she had me, and my dad was just a fling. She said she felt so cheap and so bad after, and that she never wanted me to feel like that. She wanted me to be loved. She always told me how beautiful sex could be, and how I should only do it with people who loved me. But it doesn't work like that. And to be honest, I don't want that. It sounds boring. I want more than that. Sometimes I don't want it to be pretty at all. If she knew the sort of shit I did, what I want—" He broke off, and leaned harder against Mitch's shoulder.

The wind picked up, making him cold, but it also teased the tip of his penis, reminding him it was exposed and making it hard again. So did Mitch's hand, which was kneading his bare skin now, pulling the flaps of his jeans back with the motion, further exposing the outline of his erection as it pulled the fabric of his underwear taut. "So… if I tell you that I'd like to play a game with you tonight, if I'd like to make you feel very, very slutty, then take you back to Old Blue and have some very kinky sex, am I going to push you too far?"

Sam wiggled so that Mitch's fingers slipped into the crack of his ass. "What kind of kinky sex?" He stilled. "Wait—slutty *before*?"

"There is a sex shop," Mitch said, "just down the road." His finger teased between Sam's cheeks. But his voice was unsteady, Sam noticed, as he said, "for this game, I would need some supplies."

Sam had to work to keep from reaching for himself now—he was that aroused. "Do you want to tie me up?"

"Not until we get back to the rig." Mitch's thumb brushed against his ass. "But then… yeah. Maybe."

"What—" Sam swallowed. "What would you do before?"

"I'd like to put some toys on you," Mitch said, "and in you. Then take you back to the bar for a while and get you really nice and drunk."

Sam reached over and clutched at Mitch's thigh. "*In* me? Like… like a… plug?"

"I was thinking beads," Mitch said. Then he added, "If that would be okay."

Sam thought this was such a strange conversation, like they were alternately wrestling and yielding and then getting up to shake hands. "I—it sounds… slutty." He licked his lips and forced himself to add, "In… a good way."

"You sure?"

Sam felt Mitch's finger probing, and it made him imagine Mitch sliding something up inside him, keeping it there while that bartender winked at him again. "I—I think."

He sighed and pressed his face into Mitch's shoulder. Could he do this? Compared to Mitch, everything that had come before had just been fucks in the dark.

All the more reason to do this.

"Yes." Sam was breathless but not hesitant at all.

Mitch squeezed his ass once more before pulling his hand out of Sam's jeans. He reached over and, briefly, brushed his thumb against Sam's now weeping cock-head. "Button yourself up, then, Sam, and we'll go shopping."

SAM had been to the sex shop in Middleton, and he hadn't much cared for the experience. Part of this was because he'd been terrified someone would recognize him on the street as he went back to the car, but most of it was because Emma had giggled the whole time. She'd picked up gelatinous dildos and aimed them at him, and she'd mused about strap-ons and asked him which of the fur-lined handcuffs he'd choose. He knew she was dismissing everything as silly toys, but he actually had been turned on by some of them. And scared of others. He'd never gone again.

But the Denver shop Mitch took Sam to was not The Pleasure Palace of Middleton, and Mitch wasn't giggling. In fact, his first move once they were within the doors was to put his arm around Sam's waist and slide his hand into Sam's left front pocket, pinning him to Mitch's side.

"The way this game goes," he said, aiming Sam toward a display case, "is that you pick something, and then I pick something. If I pick something that scares you, use your word."

"What about if I scare you?" Sam asked, a bit faintly as he was dazzled by the rainbow display of dildos in front of him.

"That's not possible," Mitch said, but he added, "I will tell you, though, if I think something is a bad idea."

That seemed fair. Sam nodded, and started scanning items. "Okay—so, one each?"

Mitch's hand stroked his hip from inside the pocket. "Oh, I was thinking more like four or five. Hell, Sunshine, you could talk me into a cartful of toys, but I figured you'd want to start out small."

Five? Sam picked up a shining dildo that looked to be made of glass and found, actually, that it was. Then he saw the price and had to work not to drop it. But when he picked up a few other interesting-looking items, he couldn't seem to find anything that wasn't outrageously expensive, especially when multiplied by five.

"It's too much money!" he protested.

Mitch leaned in and nuzzled his temple with a soft and wicked laugh. "Sunshine, I don't give a damn. But think of it this way: do you want something cheap shoved up your fine little ass?"

This was a fair point, but the price still bothered Sam. Four or five things each at this rate would be more than a semester's worth of textbooks. *Do I really want to do this?* When Mitch had said they would play a game, he'd thought he meant sex. Why did they need props? What was wrong with cocks and mouths and hands and asses? Really, he could do fine with nothing more than some fruit-scented lube.

But Mitch was stroking him a little more openly now, and that was pleasant, so Sam settled in and tried to get comfortable with all this. He looked around nervously at the other patrons at first, frankly marveling that no one was going to come over and stop them making a public display. But he noticed, finally, that almost everyone in the shop was male, and with other males, and the women were generally with other women. There were a few straight couples, but here they were a minority.

Mitch nudged him. "Choose, Sam."

Sam looked down again, not even sure what he was looking at. Oh yes. Dildo City. So many different shapes to shove up one's ass. He found he preferred the colored ones as opposed to those designed to look like flesh. The latter were too much like dismembered penises for his taste. But beyond this, they just all looked like dildos, and finally he just pointed at a purple one. "That," he said.

"Ah," Mitch said in a careful way that had Sam feeling self-conscious, and he tried to withdraw. But Mitch held him fast and picked up the dildo with his free hand. "Here's an important lesson, Sam. This is one for ladies only. You'll notice it doesn't really have much of a base." Sam frowned, not understanding, and Mitch mimed a

few thrusts. "Gets slippery with all that lube, and it might get sucked inside."

"Oh God!" Sam took the dildo from him and laid it hurriedly back down, blushing and shaking his head. "I don't know which one. I don't know one from another."

"Well, then why didn't you say?" Mitch chided him. "Here, let me give you a tour."

And so Mitch did. He took Sam case by case through the whole section, explaining various dildos and vibrators and plugs, debunking the mysteries of the shapes and angles. Sam stopped feeling self-conscious and started feeling simply excited, both academically and sexually. After some consideration, he chose a medium-sized orange one that had a slight curve at the top and a nice wide base.

Mitch picked it up and led Sam to another wall. "Now for mine."

This wall was full of silicone beads strung together and rippled dildos, these tricked out in the same rainbow of colors and of varying sizes and number as the ones Sam had been looking at before. Mitch's eyes were all for the beads, though. Sam had heard of these, but he'd never used them, or really even seen them. They didn't look that daunting, really. "Okay," he said, and he reached for a blue string of middle size nearest to him.

"Not quite," Mitch said, and reached up for a wicked-looking black number near the top. "This pick is mine." But he handed it to Sam, letting him inspect it. "Unless you'd like to veto?"

Sam ran his finger over the fattest bead through the package, but he wasn't really concerned. It wasn't even as big as the dildo he'd chosen, and if you squished these together they were just a little longer. He shrugged. "Sure."

Mitch smiled and tucked it under his arm. "Next?"

This isn't so bad, Sam thought, and spent the next ten minutes wandering happily through the store, occasionally asking Mitch what things were. He didn't linger long at the riding crops, and he was quietly nervous when Mitch fingered some rope, remembering what he had confessed earlier. He scanned everything, and finally, not knowing what else to choose, decided to be a little daring and picked up a cock ring, once Mitch assured him they didn't hurt. After asking for advice in which kind and size, he chose a plain, non-vibrating silver one.

For his next selection, Mitch chose a pair of leather cuffs with a short chain between them. Sam wasn't sure about them but didn't voice a complaint.

He assumed that they were done, but when they turned down the next aisle, Sam stopped short at the product all but leaping out at him from the top shelf.

Actually there were two of them, both the same thing except one was packaged for men and women and one was marketed at men and men. Frankly Sam thought the men were having more fun, but both couples were going at it with the submissive partner on all fours, and both fuck-ees were being held up by a sort of strap around their abdomen as their lover pounded them from behind.

"Oh," Sam said, and he couldn't seem to manage much else.

Mitch laughed softly and massaged Sam's hip. "Looks good to me. Is that your choice?"

"I thought we were done," Sam said, trying to protest, but he couldn't stop looking at the faces of the men.

"Do you want this, Sam?" Mitch asked, patiently.

Sam thought about lying, and at first he tried to talk himself out of it. But then shame rose up and choked him out of nowhere. *What am I doing here, buying sex toys? What am I thinking, wanting a strap for Mitch to hold me up with so he can fuck me deeper?* Except as soon as he thought about it that way, he really, *really* wanted that strap. But he couldn't speak, and so he nodded, his face as red as the anal plug on the shelf below.

Mitch picked the strap up wordlessly and reached over for a package beside it that read, "vibrating thong."

Sam laughed. "Seriously?" But Mitch only waggled his eyebrows, and after determining Sam wasn't objecting, added it to his pile.

Mitch steered them toward the movies, and here Sam felt a little more comfortable. He decided this was actually a pretty smart way to explore sexual ground without anyone feeling awkward. He twitched at a title that mentioned a golden shower and was relieved to find that Mitch didn't look interested, either. He saw one of the college boy videos that Mitch had back in Old Blue, and Sam took a moment to

inspect it more closely. It did look pretty good, he decided, except all the sleek young men were apparently having sex with one another, which was less exciting than he'd thought. But when he saw one called *Hot Truckers 2*, he laughed and waved it at Mitch.

"Interested in replacing me already, huh?" Mitch said, but he put it in his pile. When Sam protested that he didn't have to get it, Mitch held up a hand. "No, see, now I get to pick one," he said, and Sam went quiet, waiting to see what Mitch would choose.

He took his time, inspecting everything, but in the end he went back to where the college boy video was and picked up one called *Twink Kink.*

Sam took it from him, inspected it, and looked up at Mitch. "You like them, don't you? 'Twinks'."

Mitch nodded, watching Sam carefully. "You don't look pleased."

"Well, I guess *I'm* one. But it always feels like I'm being made fun of when someone calls me that. Like I'm vapid."

"I'd ask if you want me to put it back, but there's not much to be done about the others you already saw," Mitch said.

"I guess that's just it," Sam said, musing out loud. "Now I don't know, really. Because if there's all this wall of stuff, and *this* is what you pick over and over again, and if this is what I am…. Well, now I feel kind of hot."

"That you are," Mitch agreed. He nodded at the video. "Well?"

Sam sighed and shrugged. "Sure."

They looked a little longer, laughing at some of the titles, being quietly aroused at some of the suggestive poses on the covers. And then Sam went around the corner.

"Oh God," he whispered. He had found the BDSM section.

The straight porn was mixed in with this, which he certainly didn't need to see, but there was also a small gay section, and in a way, these videos were scarier than the heterosexual versions. Men and women were bent over, spread open, and tied up in the pictures that went along with the items. Even scarier were the "implements" that had no visual representation at all. *What was so bad about these that they*

can't show what they're for? Sam wondered. He began to feel a little sick.

Is this what Mitch is into?

There were some catalogs, too, under a sign that said SPECIAL ORDER ONLY. Sam picked one up, caught in his own personal train wreck, opened to a random page, and gasped.

Mitch tried to take it from him. "Walk before you run, Sam," he said, but Sam fought him and turned away, so scared he was cold, but he was also unable to stop staring.

Spreaders, they said. He didn't understand them exactly, but what he saw was a woman bent over, her ass exposed and her legs wide apart, held there by an iron bar, her hands cuffed and attached to the same. He saw another woman with a bizarre smile upon her face as she lay back on a bed, spread-eagled with arms and legs braced wide. Then he saw the man.

The man had no visible face, because the picture showed only his upturned ass and gaping, shaved hole. His ankles were spread over a foot apart, his hands clamped to the same bar as his legs. There was a lock at the end of the bar. The man was kneeling, completely shaved, his pale balls hanging down as he waited, one assumed, to be fucked.

"Hhhhhhnhgh," Sam said, and he gripped the sides of the catalog.

Mitch tore it out of his hands, almost literally. "Don't scare yourself."

But Sam could still see it, the image burned forever on his brain. "Have you done that?"

"What—used spreaders, or BDSM in general?" Mitch was putting the catalog back, but he fussed with it after, and Sam knew he was avoiding looking at him.

"Both." He watched Mitch's hand tighten on the shelving, and he had his answer. He felt cold. "You—you're *into* that?"

"Not like that!" Mitch said sharply. He looked sick, too. "Not like you're thinking. Whatever's going on in your head—fuck no, not like that." He ran agitated fingers through his hair and groped for the packet of cigarettes in his shirt pocket, but he put his hand down, acknowledging in frustration that he couldn't smoke here. He sighed.

"Look, Sunshine." Mitch stood in front of him, composing himself. "This isn't what I need to do to get off."

"But you *do* get off on it," Sam said, pressing. "You have, in the past."

Mitch looked grim. "Sometimes."

Sam turned back to the toys: clips and gags and cuffs and weird things that screwed in. "I don't get it," he said, surrendering. "Why would you want to *hurt*?" *Why would you want to hurt me?*

"I don't do the hurting stuff," Mitch said quickly. "But I know people who do. And I know it probably sounds strange, but it works for them. Look, Sam—everybody likes something different. Everybody has different limits. And that's okay."

Sam could appreciate this in an academic way, but he felt frustrated because Mitch wasn't answering his question. He reached out and took the catalog back from him, holding up the image of the bound man in front of Mitch's face. "Would you want to do that to me?" he asked.

Mitch very quickly shifted his eyes to the ceiling, looking as if he'd like to push up one of the tiles and climb into the ductwork.

That's a yes. "But *why?*" Sam asked. "I don't *get* it—what about that is hot? Please, Mitch—tell me, so I can understand."

Mitch kept his eyes turned upward, but Sam could see him sifting carefully through possible explanations. "It isn't *necessary*, he said at last. It isn't something I *need* in you, or in anybody. But if you let me put you in that, if you let me strap you down and make you so helpless, if you found that sort of helplessness fun and if you trusted me *that much*—" He shut his eyes briefly, and Sam thought he saw him suppress a shudder. "That," he said, his voice very gruff, "would be very, very hot."

Sam turned the magazine around at the photo and tried to look at it with new eyes. He was surprised to find that, if he worked at it, he could. This image, a pale, faceless man held down on a white background as if any monster could come by and fuck him at a whim was scary as fuck. But when he imagined this with Mitch, in a close, cozy room, maybe with a fireplace, with *his* body strapped inside, his eyes shut and his heart pounding as Mitch touched his skin—well, that was different. If it was Mitch gripping his hips and probing at his

opening, preparing him, getting ready to fuck him as Sam lay there, bound and bent over, unable to stop him, capable of neither encouraging or resisting, as submissive as he could possibly be—

"Oh," Sam whispered. He swayed a little, bowled over by the image, and his hands shook. *Oh.*

Mitch took the catalog away. He was looking gruff again, and highly nervous. "I don't *need* that, Sam. There are a lot of ways to show me you trust me. There are a lot of things that are hot. I love spicy food, but I wouldn't want to eat it for dinner with you if you didn't like it too."

Yes, but would you go and eat it with someone else? How the hell that could matter when Sam had offered himself up as a plaything for strangers as Mitch watched, Sam couldn't explain. But then he remembered the other man, the one Mitch had traveled with: the ghost that kept coming between them. Had Mitch done that with him? Was that what had gone wrong? Or was that what had hooked him so badly that even when Mitch was with Sam, he couldn't seem to forget this other guy?

Mitch took his hand and leaned forward to brush a kiss against his hair. "Come on, Sunshine. Let's go back to the bar."

Sam stopped brooding and looked up sharply. "Not to Old Blue?"

"Not yet." Mitch winked at him. "I have a plan."

They headed to the register again, and on the way they passed the rope display that had unnerved Sam earlier. He thought of the spreaders, and he thought of the other man who had used them with Mitch.

Sam took a deep breath, and then he picked up a package of purple nylon cord.

Mitch saw this, and he raised an eyebrow.

Sam tried to shrug. "I decided you wouldn't hurt me," he said, "so there was no reason to be worried."

Mitch got a funny look on his face. He touched Sam's cheek, then reached down and picked up a package that said "nylon ankle cuffs."

"So I *don't* hurt you," he said to Sam.

The bill would have paid for one of Sam's classes.

"Don't worry about it," Mitch said, taking his arm and hauling them both back down the street toward the bar. He hustled them into the truck, where he told Sam to take off his underwear.

Sam felt a little funny, but he also felt very horny, so he did as he was told. He worried that other people would see as he knelt on the seat, but then he felt Mitch's lips on his anus, and he forgot there was even a world beyond the truck. And once Mitch had him gasping, he felt cold lube as Mitch's finger entered him.

But then Sam felt something else.

"What—?" he started to ask, then gasped as another something slipped inside him.

"Beads," Mitch said, pushing another one in.

Sam gripped the back of the seat and held on. They were getting bigger. He didn't understand how they could feel like this, but they did: like they were ringed with fire and half a mile wide. And they were not, actually, just balling up inside him, partly because Mitch was slipping his finger in between beads and straightening them. Sam thought he could feel the things in his teeth. By the time Mitch pushed the last one in, he was starting to pant. Mitch slapped his rump and told him to sit down and put on the underwear.

"You're going to leave them *in*?" Sam cried. He sat down. At least, he tried to. "Oh God," he whimpered.

"Underwear," Mitch said calmly, but Sam could hear the arousal in his voice. He liked this.

Sam wasn't sure. In the end Mitch had to help him, because every time he sat he squirmed.

"I think we need to put your cock ring on you," Mitch said as he helped Sam back into his jeans. "You won't make it five feet without it, I don't think." And this was how Sam ended up arching off the seat, bracing himself against the dash and the window as Mitch wrestled the metal ring first onto his penis, and then, as Sam moaned, over his balls.

"Too tight?" Mitch asked, but when Sam just shook his head, he nodded. "Good."

He reached down, slipped his hand into Sam's underwear and fussed with something. Then he withdrew.

“What did you do?” Sam gasped. He wriggled, and he felt something small and flat pressed against his perineum.

“Something for later,” Mitch said, and he grabbed Sam’s hand. “Come on.”

THE bar was very busy now as they came back in, but Sam barely noticed because he was so focused on the fact that if not for the cock ring, he’d have come in his pants. He felt like his hips were undulating, and maybe they were, because every step he took made the beads roll around inside him, rubbing against his prostate, making him oddly aware of his anal canal and quite possibly his colon. It made him very hard, and horny, and if he’d have been alone, he would have lain flat and jerked himself off. But if he got too hard, he noticed, the cock ring tightened and eased his erection back down a little.

Mitch got him a drink, and Sam drank absently, too busy exploring the sensations inside him and the feel of Mitch’s hands, which were always somewhere on his body. As he leaned against the bar, pretending to listen to the bartender’s conversation with Mitch (which was once again about trucking and whether or not Mitch could set the owners up with some deliveries on the cheap), he was moving his hips just slightly, keeping up his internal friction, and at the same time this movement made Mitch’s hands slide up and down his sides. Sometimes, when Sam wiggled too much, Mitch pushed his pelvis against the back of Sam, and Sam would arch with him enough to show he was yielding, but not enough to move away. After awhile Mitch began to subtly stroke him, first his hips, then the outside of his groin, and his stomach, and while never breaking stride in his conversation with the bartender, his hand slipped forward and traced the outline of Sam’s cock with his finger, stealing down occasionally to tease the unyielding metal of the cock ring. Sam let his head fall back against Mitch’s chest, opening to him. When he felt Mitch’s erection press against his jeans, he swam away on the sensation, thinking he would be quite content to stay this way forever.

“If the two of you ever decide to sell tickets, be sure to let me know, and I’ll be first in line.”

The voice was unfamiliar and came from Sam's right; Sam turned in Mitch's arms, blinking as he came out of his sensual trance. He saw a balding middle-aged man smiling at him with an expression that was both friendly and carnal.

Sam frowned. "Tickets?"

"To your show." The man's eyes ran down Sam's body to his groin, where Mitch was fondling him again.

And just like that, the spell was over.

Embarrassment flooded Sam, blood flowing from his erection to his face as he withdrew. But even as he retreated from the attention, a small voice inside him tried to stop him. *He's not mocking you. He's enjoying you.* Sam couldn't decide, though, if this made the attention better or worse.

Mitch hadn't acknowledged the man when he'd spoken, but as Sam went from yielding to wary in his arms, he turned from the bartender to the stranger. "Can I help you?" he said, though his tone suggested he'd be helping the man out of his sight if he didn't like the next words that came out of his mouth.

The balding man caught this tone too. He held up his hands and gave Mitch a "no-harm-meant" smile. "Just admiring the pair of you, that's all." He stuck out his hand. "Leon Baines. I haven't seen either of you in here before. Are you new in town?"

"Mitch Tedsoe. We're just passing through." He accepted Leon Baines's hand and gave it a perfunctory shake before withdrawing.

Leon was smiling at Sam now, looking as if he'd like to order him for lunch. "And the lovely young man? What's your name, honey?"

"Sam," Sam said. He felt steadier now, but he was still unnerved a little by Baines's blatant sexual attention.

"A pleasure to meet you, Sam," Leon said, and when Sam didn't offer his hand, he took it himself, lifting it carefully, sliding his fingers over and between Sam's in lieu of the polite handshake he'd given Mitch. When Sam did not pull away from his touch, Leon made a sound that seemed to Sam very much like a purr. "Oh, but you are *delightful,* my dear," Leon said, and he kept hold of Sam's hand.

Sam glanced up over his shoulder at Mitch, who had resumed his conversation with the bartender. But he noticed that Mitch's eyes were not entirely focused on the man behind the bar. They would slide to the right occasionally, just enough to take in what was going on beside him. When he realized Sam was looking at him, he stopped his conversation again. His eyes shifted to Leon before moving back to Sam, and then he raised an eyebrow. Sam held still, confused. Mitch's mouth played at a smile before he bent down and whispered in Sam's ear.

"Play if you want to, Sunshine."

He returned his focus to the bartender again.

Sam looked back at Leon, who had slid a stool forward and leaned against the bar. Leon transferred Sam's hand there as well, where he continued to make quiet love to it as he spoke. "So where are you from?"

"Iowa," Sam confessed, his eyes on his captive hand.

"A *farm boy,*" Leon said with zeal.

Sam gave him an irritated look. "I've never even been on one. A farm, I mean," he corrected quickly, realizing his mistake too late.

But Leon was too wrapped up in his fantasy to pick up the accidental bait. "So wholesome and sweet. And *strong*, and lithe. Look at those beautiful muscles." He stroked Sam's arm, his fingers tracing the outline of his biceps, looking at them as if he'd like to eat them, or at least lick them.

Sam was not exactly turned on by this, but he wasn't appalled by it, either. Mostly he was just surprised. No one had ever ogled him before—well, Mitch had, but somehow he was different. No one had ever looked at him like *this*. It was like the look Darin gave him, like he was a piece of meat, but there was an appreciation in it that he didn't quite know what to do with. And Sam realized it was the attraction he was attracted to, not the man. He didn't know what that meant, and he turned in refuge to his drink, which to his dismay he found was empty.

"Allow me," Leon said, and the next thing Sam knew, he had another one. It was the same thing Mitch had gotten him, something fruity and sweet that went down way too easy.

"So where are you headed, Iowa boy?"

Leon had moved closer now, and somehow Sam had slipped sideways against Mitch. The result was that Mitch was stroking his left hip with his hand, and Leon was rubbing Sam's thigh with his knee. And all the while Sam wiggled, feeling the beads tickle his insides. He clung to his drink and tried to keep hold of himself. "Just traveling." Leon's knee nudged him a little harder, and he clutched at the bar. "With Mitch. I'm traveling with Mitch. He's a semi driver."

"Lovely," Leon said, not sounding like he cared at all. He slid forward on his stool and ran his hand over Sam's hip. When Sam just stared at him, a little fuzzily, Leon smiled a wolfish smile and slid his hand forward, angling toward Sam's cock. Sam gasped, tensed, and at last, Mitch turned around and noticed what was going on.

But he wasn't outraged as Sam expected. He just stared at Leon, who stared back, his hand still poised over Sam's fly.

"This man bothering you, Sam?" he asked, calmly.

Leon gave Sam a look that somehow conveyed innocence and wickedness all at once.

"Um," Sam said.

Leon smiled up at Mitch. "I was just asking if Sam wanted to come back and meet a few of my friends."

Mitch ran his hand across Sam's shoulders and looked down at him. "Well? Do you want to go?" When Sam tossed an *are you high?* look at him, he laughed. "I think that's a no."

"The both of you come, then," Leon said, and he nodded toward the bartender while looking at Mitch. "You've been talking business with him all night. My friends all own businesses. If you're looking for merchandise to carry, you might find some at our table. I can put in a word for you, if you like."

Mitch's hand was still stroking Sam's shoulder. "It's up to Sam."

Sam turned away from Leon and stood on tiptoe to reach Mitch's ear. "You did see that he was pawing me?" he whispered, perhaps a little too loudly.

"I did," Mitch said. "You seemed to like it. Was I wrong?"

Even half drunk as Sam was, he could hear the hesitation mixed in with the casualness of Mitch's question. He thought of their discussion before, of his own insistence that he wanted to try things a

little kinky, and he realized, with some shock, that Mitch had been letting all this go on *on purpose.* And that he liked it.

Sam glanced over at Leon, who winked. Sam bit his lip.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Mitch whispered. "Nothing that you don't want. I'll watch you the whole time, no matter where you are in the bar. I'll keep you safe, Sam."

Sam leaned into him, nuzzling just a little. "Okay," he whispered.

And just like that they were moving across the bar, Leon carrying Sam's drink and Mitch leading Sam with his arm around his waist. Sam's throat felt dry, though, and since Leon had his, he stole a drink from Mitch's glass on the way. Sam looked up at Mitch in surprise.

"You're drinking Pepsi," he said. "With nothing in it!"

Mitch leaned down to speak into his ear again. "Can't keep you safe if I'm not sober enough to pay attention. Also, we'll need to get going in no later than an hour, and I need to drive us back across town."

It was funny how this more than anything made Sam feel safe, and he smiled a little as Leon took them to his table and introduced them to the three men seated there. They were in a curved booth, and everyone shoved over to let them sit down. Leon tried to maneuver Sam between his friend Craig and himself, but Sam held tight to Mitch, and in the end Leon ended up on the end.

Leon hadn't been joking: the other men were local businessmen, and Mitch was soon chatting them up, asking who their carriers were and what they charged. To Sam's relief, Craig, who was beside him, looked bored.

"I hate it when they talk business," he murmured to Sam.

Sam smiled at him, and Craig smiled back. Craig was younger than Leon, and a lot more handsome, and a lot less smarmy. He seemed attracted to Sam, too, which Sam enjoyed.

"What do you like to talk about?" Sam asked him, stirring his drink with its straw.

Craig shrugged. "Anything else. TV. Movies. Music."

Sam beamed. "What sort of music?"

"The usual. Pop, mostly. Some jazz. A little electronica. Have you heard the new Imogen Heap album? It's absolutely gorgeous."

Sam tilted his head to the side and regarded him with as much seriousness as his succession of fruity drinks would allow. “Who do you prefer: Kylie, or Madonna?”

Craig looked pained. “How can you ask? It’s impossible to choose.” But he tapped his finger against his beer and considered it. “If I *had* to, though, it would have to be Madonna. Oh, don’t give me that look,” he scolded Sam, when Sam made a face. “You’re just a puppy. If you’d lived through Blond Ambition, you’d think differently.”

“Did you go to the concert?” Sam asked, impressed now.

“No,” Craig admitted. “I was ten. But I remember watching the show on HBO and wishing I could. I’ve caught every show since Drowned World, though.”

“I love Kylie,” Sam admitted. “I about died when I heard she was coming to the US, but I couldn’t get tickets.”

“I went,” Craig said casually.

Sam clamped a hand on his leg. “*Oh my God.* How—how was it? Was it amazing?”

Craig’s eyes danced, and he leaned in close to whisper. “Sweetheart, it was magic.”

“Tell me,” Sam whispered, his hand clutching Craig’s thigh. “Tell me all about it, *please*.”

And so Craig did, detailing every song and sequin, speaking softly into Sam’s ear, and as the story wound on, his hands began to wander over Sam, stroking his arm. The toe of his shoe stroked Sam’s calf. And all the while, Sam kept his hand on Craig’s thigh.

Craig leaned in and nuzzled Sam’s ear, nipping it. Sam shuddered.

“Is your boyfriend going to beat me up for this?” Craig whispered.

Sam cast a sideways glance at Mitch, who was still deep in conversation, but when Sam turned toward him, Mitch slid his hand over Sam’s, the one that was resting on his own thigh, and he squeezed.

“Don’t think so,” Sam whispered back, then shivered as Craig laughed quietly. “I—I think he likes to watch, actually.”

“So you’re a little kinky, are you? Very nice.” He suckled briefly on Sam’s earlobe. “You guys looking for a third?”

Sam had a sudden vision of Mitch holding him against his chest, watching while Craig kissed his way down his stomach. He sucked in a breath but found he couldn’t answer.

Craig laughed. “You’re sweet, Sam. Sexy, but a little shy.” Beneath the table, Craig ran his hand over Sam’s knee and gently lifted his leg, hooking it over his own. Sam dug his fingers into Craig’s leg as the other man’s fingers traveled up his thigh. “Play with me, Sam?” Craig whispered, and Sam could say nothing, only nod.

As if from a great distance away, he remembered that there were other people at the table, and he sat up a little, opening his eyes again to let them dart warily around the group. Mitch was speaking to the two across from him, something about rates per pound, and they were looking at him intently, listening, but Leon was watching Craig and Sam with interest. Mitch’s hand, however, was sliding over Sam’s leg closest to him, and as Craig’s moved higher, Mitch’s did too. Sam squirmed, realizing what was coming, but even though he moved a hand over to stop it, his fondlers met in the middle over Sam’s swollen groin, and Sam’s hand served only to hold them there in emphasis.

Sam went very still, and so did Craig and Mitch.

Torn by dueling bursts of heat and terror, Sam dared a look at Mitch, who as Sam watched, lifted his eyebrows slightly. But then he smiled, just the tiniest upturn of lips, and with terrible slowness, Mitch’s hand shifted, caressing first Sam’s, then Craig’s, and then Mitch stroked Sam’s rigid cock.

Now it was Craig who shuddered. He leaned forward, his free arm resting on the table as he spoke to the two men beside him. “Tell Mitch about this new design you’re testing,” he suggested. “Maybe he can hook you up with a supplier.”

As the men began to speak animatedly, Craig nodded and appeared interested, but all the while his hand danced with the other two beneath the table. His fingers tangled with Mitch’s and Sam’s, and he ran his thumb down the ridge of Sam’s erection. Then, still pretending to listen to the conversation, he reached up and undid the button to Sam’s fly. Sam flinched, but he didn’t stop him, only clutched at Mitch’s fingers.

Mitch picked up Sam's fingers, placed them on the tail of his zipper, closed Sam's thumb and forefinger around the tip, and forced him to pull it down. Then he reached inside the strange underwear, pulled Sam's erection out, found Craig's hand, and placed it at the bottom of Sam's shaft.

Sam sank back against the booth, working to control his breathing as the two men stroked him in a strange concert, completely ignoring each other above the table as they tortured Sam together below it. Their ministrations made Sam wiggle, too, which aggravated the beads, and he began to sweat and clench his hands, one on Mitch's leg, the other tangled in their joined fists. Sam was so hard he thought he would explode. He ached, not just in his groin but in his shoulders, and his legs, and in his belly. He was exquisitely turned on, more than he'd ever been in his life. But he was also embarrassed to be found out, and so he kept quiet, letting the men torture him, letting them send him out to sea on a thick haze of lust.

And then his balls began to tingle.

At first he thought he was just that turned on, but then he realized, no, there was something buzzing there, something small and focused. It was pulsing, sometimes buzzing hard, sometimes soft. Just when it was about to drive Sam out of his mind, it would fade away, but then it would return without warning. It was the underwear, he realized. It buzzed again, and Sam clutched at Mitch, whose other hand moved over and closed Sam's hand over something small and smooth, with a button. Sam pressed it experimentally, and the buzzing stopped. Mitch took it back, and the underwear began to buzz again.

Vibrating underwear. That had been the little something Mitch had slipped inside, some control to make the underwear rock and roll. And apparently it had a remote.

The hands on Sam were becoming more insistent, and the buzzing was coming harder and more frequently, and Sam was starting to thrust his hips against the onslaught, half trying to escape, half trying to encourage them. His eyes kept darting from the businessmen to Leon, the former of whom were too engrossed in business to notice, and the latter who was now watching Sam openly. Leon met Sam's eyes, and Sam found he could not look away.

Craig found his cock ring, slid his thumb against it, and Sam bit his lip to keep from crying out.

Leon smiled darkly and looked down at his watch. “Goodness. Will you look at the time? Ten thirty, already.”

The two men who had yet to realize what was going on beneath the table startled almost in unison. “Oh no!” one of them said. “Honey,” he said, turning to the other, “we’d better get home.”

“We have your card,” the other said to Mitch, smiling apologetically. “We’ll be in touch. Good to meet you,” he said to Sam, who looked up at him through a haze of alcohol and arousal. The man faltered, as if at last realizing what was going on, and then he laughed. When he rose, he winked. “Enjoy your evening, Craig,” he said, and the two men were gone.

Craig kept a firm grip on Sam’s cock, making Sam’s eyes roll back in his head. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow, Leon,” Craig said with a fierceness that made Sam shudder again. When Leon started to object, Craig said, “I’ll do the Peterson project for you, if you leave.”

Leon hesitated, then swore as he rose. “You’re a horrible bitch, Craig,” he said. “They were *mine*.”

“*Were* being the operative word,” Craig said, and he leaned forward to nibble at Sam’s neck. Leon swore again, but then he was gone.

The buzzing increased again, and Sam gave up, tipped his head back against the booth, and let out a cascading sigh.

“My apartment,” Craig said, nuzzling his way down Sam’s neck, “is just a block from here.”

The words kicked heat into Sam, but fear, too, and the latter won out. He turned to Mitch and dug his fingers into his lover’s arm. Craig was licking his way down Sam’s throat, but Sam kept his eyes on Mitch, who bent toward him.

“Violet,” Sam whispered.

Mitch’s face softened, and beneath the table, he firmly pushed Craig’s hand away. “No, thank you.”

Craig looked disappointed, but when he looked at Sam, his expression changed. “Ah,” he said ruefully. “Maybe… maybe we can just find somewhere a little more private?”

Sam averted his eyes, still clutching at Mitch's hand.

"Do you want to leave?" Mitch asked, stroking Sam's thigh.

Sam didn't know. Craig's hand was moving over his body again, stalking carefully, and it made him horny, but it also made him confused. His panic stemmed now from not knowing what he wanted, let alone how to vocalize it. He turned his face into Mitch's arm, and shuddered.

"Talk to me, Sam," Mitch whispered. "Tell me what you want."

Sam shut his eyes and shook his head against Mitch's sleeve. "I don't know!"

"Do you like this?" Mitch asked. "The three of us playing?"

Playing. Everyone kept saying that, as if they were talking about swings and merry-go-rounds. Sam let out a breath. "Yes, but—it's a little too… much." He shivered as Craig's hands found his cock again. "But I don't want it to stop, either."

"Do you dance, honey?" Craig asked, his hand sliding up Sam's arm. "We could all go out on the floor together and dance."

Sam looked at Mitch for guidance, but at that moment Craig's thumb flicked against the tip of Sam's penis. He moaned.

"There's a place off to the side that will be perfect." He tucked Sam inside his underwear and zipped but didn't button him. He leaned over and kissed Sam's cheek before tugging at his hand. "Come on."

Craig led Sam out of the booth, and Mitch followed. Once they were standing, Mitch held onto Sam's waist again, his thumb hitched into Sam's belt loop, for which he was grateful, because it kept his undone pants from falling down. His heart was threatening to pound out of his chest as they wove between the dancers, moving far to the back of the room to a dark corner by the stage, where they slipped into the space behind a large speaker. Once there, Craig turned, took Sam by the hips, and smiled as he pulled their hips together. He began to move, his hand snaking back to Mitch's waist, pulling him closer. Mitch came willingly, pushing up against Sam's sliding waistband.

They were dancing, moving mostly with their hips as hands went everywhere and Sam felt the heat building inside of him again. Mitch didn't do much, just held him and stroked, but that was fine, because Craig more than made up for him. No one could see them, not with the

crowded bodies on the floor or the huge speaker blocking them, but neither were they alone. Sam felt safe and very, very aroused. When Craig took Sam's cock out of his pants again, he let him, and Mitch took hold of his arms, pulling Sam's hands up to lock them behind so that his fingers were tangled in Mitch's wiry hair. As the music pulsed around them and arousal carried him away, Sam closed his eyes, tipped his head back, and surrendered.

Craig kissed his way down Sam's throat, his hands working with intent at Sam's cock. Mitch had his hands beneath Sam's shirt, stroking the flexing tautness of Sam's belly, but he dipped down, tugging at Sam's waistband before pushing it down so that Sam's whole cock was in Craig's hand. Craig groaned, tugging harder. He nuzzled Sam's cheek and stole a swift, hard kiss from his lips.

Mitch let go of Sam and grabbed Craig by the back of the head. Sam watched, dizzy with lust, as Mitch bent around him and took Craig's bottom lip between his teeth.

Then Mitch let go, leaned back, and pushed Craig down to his knees. Sam watched, spiraling out of his head as Mitch's hands guided Sam's cock into Craig's mouth. Craig looked up, and Sam looked down, mesmerized by the sight. Mitch's hands slid Sam's pants farther down, stroking the smooth globes of his ass as Craig swallowed Sam, drew back, and took him in to the root, his lips closing over Sam's cock ring. Sam felt the ring tighten as his erection swelled.

He tugged at the back of Mitch's neck, trembling against his fingers as they slid to his cleft. He gasped when he felt Mitch's fingers find the cord to his beads. He cried out when Mitch began to pull, push, and turn the handle. He tipped his head back, looked up, and froze as he saw Mitch watching his face with dark intent. His lips parted as he felt Mitch tug on the beads again. Then, still watching Sam's face, Mitch slipped a finger in alongside them.

Craig was sucking him, Mitch was fucking him, and Sam felt himself slide away, staring up at Mitch's face until he couldn't see anything, his eyes glazed by lust. He let Mitch's thrusts push him deep into Craig's throat, let the music drown out his cries as the two men used him. He opened to them, right there on the dance floor, and let them.

Sam came abruptly, and violently, his hips bucking against Craig's face and his fingernails digging into Mitch's neck. He shut his eyes and tried to pull himself against Mitch's mouth to silence himself, but Mitch moved away, and so he pressed against his throat instead, burying his scream against Mitch's pounding jugular, against the fading hickey he'd left there just the night before. When it was over, he shuddered, convulsing for several seconds before sagging, depleted, against Mitch's chest.

Craig rose, hands skimming up Sam's sides before taking Sam's face in his hands. He glanced at Mitch, paused, then kissed Sam sweetly on the cheek. Then he pulled back, grinning, and planted a kiss on Mitch's mouth as well, though Sam noticed Mitch kept his lips firmly closed.

"Please," Craig said, giving Sam's cock a gentle squeeze as he tucked him back into his pants. "Come back to my apartment. I swear I'll be good."

But Mitch refused before Sam could even object. "We've got to get going." He pulled his finger out of Sam and did up Sam's jeans.

Craig looked disappointed, but not surprised. He pulled his wallet out and handed Mitch a card. "If you're ever in Denver again," he said, and with one last touch of Sam's cheek, he was gone.

Mitch pocketed the card and took Sam's hand. "Come on," he said, then led them both out of the bar into the parking lot.

Chapter 7

THEY drove in silence back to the warehouse, and at first, Sam was glad.

He sank into his seat carefully, the anal beads now even more irritating after his orgasm, the cock ring heavy against his tender balls. He found he could not look at Mitch and took refuge in watching the city pass by. But he startled out of his reverie when Mitch swung abruptly into the driveway of a fast food restaurant.

"I forgot to feed you," Mitch said a little gruffly. "You want a cheeseburger?"

Sam nodded and touched his stomach absently. At once, he was hungry.

Mitch ordered him two and the same for himself. He tossed Sam's to him and ate his own while he drove, though Sam noticed he only ate one of his burgers. Mitch kept his hands rigidly on the wheel, looking upset. Sam ate all of his food, but he watched Mitch as he did so, wondering at this switch. He felt like he should worry that he'd done something, but he was so confused by the back and forth and the sheer madness of everything they'd done that he couldn't manage much of any reaction, except that he was tired and that he was glad he was with Mitch.

But when they got to the warehouse, though Mitch parked the truck, he didn't take the keys out of the ignition. In fact he didn't make any move to leave the vehicle, just sat there gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead. And then in a defeated surrender, Mitch slumped.

"I'm okay," Sam said eventually. "I swear." He rubbed his greasy fingers nervously against his jeans. God, was it always going to be this awkward, forever? When would either of them learn to let go?

Mitch glanced at him warily. "You looked… upset when we left."

Sam started to pull his legs up onto the seat but stopped when it aggravated his insides. He rested his cheek on the back of the seat instead, looking at Mitch's arm rather than his face. "I wasn't. I'm not." He forced his eyes up. "I'm just overwhelmed."

"I shouldn't have had us go back to the cab, after the shop. I shouldn't even have had us go there." Mitch sounded wretched. "I should've just brought us here."

God, Sam was *tired* of this! "You didn't want to," Sam said, surprising himself at his own self-assurance. "You wanted to tease me. And I wanted you to."

"This is everything I ever did wrong with a man coming back to haunt me all over again," Mitch said. He rubbed his hands over his face.

What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to say? Sam pulled his knees in again, but as soon as he made the move, he jerked and hissed.

"What's wrong?" Mitch asked, reaching for him in alarm. "Did you get hurt?"

Sam blushed. "The—beads. I'm just so sensitive now."

Mitch pulled the keys out at last. "Come on, then," he said. "We'll go to the rig and take them out, and then I'll leave you alone."

Sam reached out and put a staying hand on his arm.

"But I don't want you to leave me alone," Sam said.

Mitch looked at him, and they sat there frozen in the dark, silent truck. *Tell me what you want.* Sam didn't want to. He didn't want to hear out loud what he wanted. But Mitch needed it. Mitch needed it a lot more than Sam needed to not feel awkward.

"I want," he began, speaking so softly he wasn't sure Mitch could hear, "you to take me into Old Blue, and I want you to do things to me. I want you to—to use the things you bought on me. Every last one of them. I want you to… to…." His breath caught, and he had to shut his eyes. "I want you to m-make me show myself to you, and I want you to

f-fuck me." He swallowed his fear back down and pushed on. "I was upset after the bar because I loved that so much. Because it felt so good to have you watch. Because it was so dirty and awful, to do all that with a stranger. Because it was hot and it was wonderful, and it's everything I've always been afraid to be. It's hard for me to believe that someone actually wants to see me that way. But I know that you do—it's just hard to accept that. But when I stop being afraid, I know it's okay, because it's you." He opened his eyes and looked over at Mitch, feeling more vulnerable than he'd ever felt in his life. "I feel safe—with you."

Mitch stared at him for a long time, his face unreadable in the dark. Then he reached out and stroked Sam's cheek with a single finger. It smelled musky, and Sam realized it was because it had been inside him. He shivered and turned to press a tentative kiss against the digit.

Mitch stroked his face again. "I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"I'm not." Sam nuzzled the finger again and took the musky tip briefly into his mouth. "Can we go inside?"

Mitch nodded, took the keys out, and opened the door.

Sam brought the bag from the sex shop, and they walked side by side without touching all the way back to Old Blue. Once inside, Mitch disappeared into the bathroom, and Sam stood in the darkened cab, trying to decide what to do.

He pulled out his iPhone and fiddled with the radio until he had music playing softly. He chose Kylie, needing comfort, but he put on *Impossible Princess,* because he needed edgy and extra sexy. When Mitch came out, Sam smiled shyly and took his turn. He took off the cock ring and put it in his pocket, but when he started on the beads, he heard Mitch call him. He hesitated, but then he let them go, turned, and opened the door.

Mitch grabbed him, pulled him out of the bathroom, and pinned him to the floor.

Sam flailed, more from surprise than anything, but when Mitch's hands were on his clothes, he stopped and helped him, sitting up and pulling his shirt up over his body as Mitch tugged ruthlessly at his jeans and underwear until he was naked. But before Sam could get his T-shirt over his wrists, Mitch trapped it there, tangled and bunched, and he

pushed Sam's hands high above his head. He felt something thick and rough slide around first one wrist, and then another, and when he tried to pull his arms back down, they were stuck fast, and he heard the metal scrape of the chain as it slid against whatever Mitch had stuck it to. *The cuffs*, he realized. *The cuffs with a chain between them.*

He was bound.

Mitch was on his knees now, and Sam watched, his cock thickening as Mitch fastened the nylon cuffs to his ankles and looped the rope though them. Lifting Sam's legs one at a time, Mitch snaked the rope through something in the ceiling before bringing it down to truss up Sam's other leg in the same manner. When he finished, Sam's ass was barely touching the floor, and his legs were open in an obscene V, his bead-filled ass gaping beneath his swollen cock. *Too much!* he wanted to cry, but that was the fear talking. Lust was rising, higher and faster than the fear, and he heard his own confession from the pickup echoing in his ears.

It's okay to do this, to be this slutty, Sam told himself, *if Mitch likes it too.*

Mitch stood, surveyed his work, and then looked at Sam, his face full of question. But there was lust, too, and want. He liked what he'd done to Sam. He liked the thought of what was coming. He didn't think Sam was a dirty whore.

He thought Sam was a *beautiful* whore.

"Please," Sam whispered, straining against his bonds with a terrible sort of pleasure. "*Please*."

"Please what?" Mitch asked, quietly.

Sam struggled, thrusting his hips into the air. "Please do something to me."

"Something slutty?" Mitch suggested quietly, with a smile.

"*Yes,*" Sam whispered. He thrust again, his eyes on Mitch's waist.

"Give me a 'for instance'," Mitch said.

Mitch's hand was sliding over his groin. Sam licked his lips and said before he could stop himself, "Take off your pants, and put your cock in me. Please."

"Where in you, Sam?"

Sam shuddered and whispered, "In my mouth."

He shook as Mitch unbuckled, unfastened, and undressed. Sam's mouth went dry as Mitch straddled him, knelt, and nudged his penis into Sam's mouth.

Sam lifted his head and engulfed it, moaning as he suckled, opening his throat, opening his eyes, watching the rough tuft of blond hair until he had to close his eyes because his face was buried in it. When Mitch grabbed his hair and pulled his head back, he held still, letting him thrust inside him, almost choking. Mitch began to grunt and gasp, and then he simply fucked Sam's mouth, mercilessly, taking away Sam's breath until he spent himself inside him. When he pulled back, Sam coughed, and gagged, and winced around his tender jaw as he struggled to swallow Mitch's semen.

Mitch knelt beside him and took his face in his hands.

"I don't want to go too far with you," Mitch said, looking down into Sam's eyes with a fear greater than anything Sam had felt in the bar. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't want—"

To lose you. Sam could hear the unspoken words, could see them in Mitch's eyes, even in the dark. Sam shut his eyes and nuzzled his hand.

"I want to go too far," Sam whispered. "With you."

Mitch bent down, carefully, and Sam caught his mouth, trying to tease him into a kiss. He shut his eyes as Mitch kissed and licked at the spunk around his mouth, his lips, and then stole inside, kissing him deeply.

He rose, moving away from Sam's body in the dark, moving back to his exposed anus, and Sam lifted his head and watched as Mitch tugged at the cord to the beads. Sam fought and bucked and struggled against his bonds as Mitch pulled them out, one by one, and when they were all out, he gasped as Mitch pushed his finger inside, sawing slowly in and out of him.

"You're so hot inside, Sunshine," he murmured. "So hot and tight." He pulled his finger out and lifted Sam's ass, spreading his cheeks wide, enjoying the view. He played with Sam for awhile, opening and closing him, pushing his fingers inside, withdrawing, until Sam was bucking and begging and pleading to be fucked.

Mitch took out the dildo Sam had chosen, smeared it with lube, and pushed it inside of Sam with one stroke, burying it to the base. Sam

arched and shut his eyes, waiting for the thrust. But Mitch only teased him with it, turning it around inside him, pulling it out a little, pushing it in, turning it, until Sam was swearing and sweating and almost crying with need. Mitch only smiled, saying nothing, and continued his torture.

It may have been ten minutes, it may have been an hour, but eventually Mitch withdrew the dildo, untied Sam's restraints, and carried him to the bed. Sam started to stroke him, and kissed him, trying to urge him back into engagement, but Mitch only turned him around, pressing his erection against Sam's back as he pulled Sam against his chest. He didn't touch Sam's penis, but he stroked his chest instead, and his nipples, and his neck.

Sam was so hard he was aching. He strained against Mitch, making pleading sounds, but Mitch quieted him with kisses and more tender strokes.

"Just give me a minute, Sunshine," he murmured.

Sam didn't want a minute. "Mitch," he cried, and he bucked again.

Mitch's hand closed tight around the base of his shaft, not hurting him, but it felt like the cock ring all over again.

"A minute, Sunshine," Mitch repeated.

Sam stilled as best he could, and gave him one.

Mitch kept his hand on Sam's cock, but once Sam had calmed, Mitch caught his mouth, then nuzzled into his neck and simply held him. Even despite his arousal, it was so sweet, so peaceful, that Sam began to calm. It felt so good to be held, and it was such a strange juxtaposition to the hardcore scene they'd just finished. It made Sam feel soft inside, too, so soft it felt almost dangerous. *I would do anything for him,* he realized. *Anything.*

He stilled a little more, eager but also apprehensive to see what "anything" would turn out to be.

He startled when he felt something brush his ass. When he realized it was a cold fingerful of lube, Sam shifted and opened for Mitch, heart pounding a little faster in anticipation of what was to come. Mitch nipped at his shoulder and nudged his hip, and Sam turned, wordless and half-hypnotized, lifting his ass into the air as he pressed his face into the pillow.

He felt something slide beneath his belly, and then he was lifted at the same moment he was impaled. *The strap*, he realized, and let his body soften, opening to Mitch as he thrust inside him. It was a silent, wicked fucking, slow and hard and thorough, Mitch grinding his hips against Sam, nudging his thighs wide. He pulled Sam tight against his pelvis with the strap, until Sam couldn't move at all, and his cries went higher and higher as Mitch's cock went deeper and deeper and deeper inside him.

"What's too far now, Sam?" Mitch rasped, thrusting harder. "What do you need?"

"Come inside me," Sam whispered. "Come hard. *Now,* Mitch! I want—almost hurt—deeper—*oh!*"

His cries were like a song, and he almost came, but Mitch came first, burying himself deep, shuddering as he pushed even farther into Sam. When he let go, Sam collapsed into the bed, and Mitch collapsed on him. But before Sam could recover, Mitch rolled them over, slipped the strap around Sam's leg, put the handles in one hand, and yanked Sam's legs apart.

He put Sam's hand on himself, encouraged him to stroke, then reached down and tucked his other leg back, opening him again until Sam felt himself gape. Mitch got Sam stroking again, then reached down, tickled at Sam's anus. Then he hauled back and slapped it.

The sound rang out through the cab, and Sam cried out, and he cried out again as Mitch slapped him once more and then again. The pain shot through Sam but the pleasure did, too, until he was bucking and wanking and grunting as he watched Mitch spank his tender hole. When he began to tense, Mitch jammed his finger deep, caught his mouth and kissed him as he came.

Was it the alcohol making Sam spiral so high, so far, so totally beyond any control he'd ever known? Was the buzzing inside him because he was, in all honesty, very drunk? Was that why he'd behaved with so much abandon? Was that why he'd not just let Mitch use him this way but encouraged him?

Or was this just the secret abandon he truly wanted, and Mitch had only brought it out of him?

Mitch lowered them back down to the bed and drew Sam against him, semen and all. "We'll buy new sheets tomorrow," he said and

kissed him again. Sam shut his eyes, shut off his thoughts, and sank into his lover's arms.

IT HAD been a wonderful, incredible night. But when Sam woke the next morning, he immediately wished he were dead.

Mitch was not in the bed beside him, but he could hear him moving around. Every scrape and shuffle echoed like gunshots in his aching head, and he groaned, falling back, sweating and queasy into the pillow.

"Need the toilet?" Mitch called, and Sam groaned in answer.

Mitch laughed, ruefully. "Water's in the fridge. Aspirin's in the cupboard. I gotta go get this rig loaded." He came close to the bed and touched Sam's hair. "You gonna be okay?"

Sam tried to nod, but it hurt too much. He gave Mitch a thumbs up instead, rolled over into the pillow, and did his best to go back to sleep.

This proved impossible, however, as every time he drifted off there would be another bump and scrape from things being loaded into the back of the trailer. Eventually he gave up and made a twenty minute project of getting himself to the toilet, where he emptied first one end and then the other. He rested for some time with his head on the lid before cleaning up both the room and himself with a shower. By the time he got himself out, dried, and dressed, Mitch was back in the truck and peeking his head through the curtain.

"You gonna be able to ride okay?" he asked, when he got a good look at Sam's green face. Sam nodded, carefully. "Good," Mitch said, "because we're leaving in ten minutes. You need us to stop anywhere on the way out? Need anything? Something to eat? Peppermint, maybe?"

Sam considered for a minute. "Gum?" he croaked.

Mitch nodded. "Can do." His eyes flickered over the bed. "And spare sheets." Sam blushed, remembering the crust of semen he'd washed off himself in the shower, remembering how it got there. Mitch caught the look on Sam's face, and his own expression turned wary. "Any regrets, now that it's morning?"

Flashes of touches, glances, and sensations played across Sam's mental screen. He blushed scarlet but shook his head and made himself look at Mitch to reassure him. "Just the alcohol."

Mitch seemed to study him a moment. Then he nodded, appearing satisfied. "Get ready to roll then, Sunshine," he said, and disappeared again.

They were on the road in less than ten minutes, in fact, though they stopped almost immediately at a strip mall along the way where Mitch ducked into a budget store and came out with several changes of sheets, four packets of gum, Pepto Bismol, and two Starbucks cups. Sam held up his hands at the cup Mitch pushed at him, until Mitch held up the tea bag hanging from the side.

"Peppermint," he said, and he set it in the holder nearest Sam's seat. He pointed to the bag on the floor between them. "There's hard peppermint candy, too, in there with your gum. In case."

"You're a believer in peppermint, I take it," Sam said, his voice a bit more steady now.

Mitch shrugged as he pulled his seat belt back across his body. "Gives me comfort, I guess. My mom gave it to me when I was little. Seemed like it fixed about anything."

Sam reached for the bag and began to fish inside it. "It was spearmint with my mom. She didn't like peppermint."

"Oh," Mitch said, looking disappointed. "You should have said—I would have gotten that instead."

"No," Sam corrected. "I hate it, especially now. That was the only thing that calmed her, toward the end. The smell of spearmint Lifesavers makes me think of my mom lying there rasping in her bed."

Mitch nodded, a little gruffly. "No spearmint, then."

Sam unwrapped a piece of gum and popped it in his mouth. He offered a piece to Mitch, who declined.

"How old were you again?" Mitch asked. "When your mom passed? Seventeen, you said?" Sam nodded. "So you were out of school?"

Sam shook his head. "I was a senior in high school, but between her being sick and my being so upset after, I dropped out and started over the next fall, which was why I didn't start college until I was twenty." He propped his feet on the dash and slouched a little in his

chair, looking out the window as they wound around the interstate, heading for the foothills. They'd been at that for half an hour, but they still were quite some distance away. "My aunt put me in counseling, which upset me at the time, but I'm glad for it now. I should probably go back. Sometimes I'm still angry that Mom had to die." He ran his finger down the glass of the window, watching its descent. "She fought MS almost my whole life, and then cancer killed her. It just felt like God was cheating. And that he was really fucking mean."

Feeling like he'd exposed a bit too much, Sam retreated into silence, eventually reaching for his tea and sipping it. He watched as they wound into the foothills at last, distracted by how much they seemed like mountains.

"My mom ran off when I was eight," Mitch said out of nowhere. Sam looked at him, surprised, but Mitch kept his eyes on the road, except when he was reaching for his coffee, and even then he only looked at the console. "Went off with some guy she met at a bar. She puts it better than that now, said Dad was hitting her, but I didn't know it then. I just knew she was gone."

"Jesus," Sam said under his breath. "*Eight*?" He tried to remember himself at eight, and couldn't. The only thing he could think of was crushing on David Duchovny while his Mom watched *The X-Files*. He hadn't worked out at eight that the funny feelings he felt when Mulder had his shirt off were sexual, but that didn't stop him from holding his penis tight in his bed as he replayed the scenes. Other than this, though, he remembered eight years old as innocent and happy. Hell, he'd still believed in Santa, at eight. "That… that's young."

Mitch nodded. "Fucked me up a bit, I'll admit. Though it's funny, I don't remember being sad. Just hollow and confused. Was sure it was something I'd done, but she'd always seemed so nice to me, like she really liked me." He rubbed at his mouth, looking suddenly self-conscious. "Don't know why I said all that."

"No," Sam said, turning in his seat to better look at Mitch. "I mean—I don't know. I like talking about my mom." He realized it might not be the same for Mitch and faltered. "But if you'd rather—"

"No," Mitch interrupted, quickly. "I'd like to hear about your mom. I'd like to hear any stories about you."

"Me too," Sam said. "I mean—I'd like to hear your stories too."

Mitch rubbed at his jaw again. "Well, not many of mine are good."

"Oh. Well, if you don't—"

"—but I don't mind telling—" Mitch said at the same time. He stopped and tossed Sam a rueful smile. "If you don't mind listening."

"No," Sam said. "I mean—" He picked up his tea again, taking refuge in it while he tried to explain himself. "I like listening. To whatever you want to tell me."

And so they drove their way through the foothills, taking turns sharing stories from their lives.

"My mom loved irises," Sam said, slouching down in his seat and angling himself sideways so he could watch the mountains rising up around him as they wove their way inside. "She thought they were the most beautiful flowers, but my aunt hates them. Says they don't bloom long enough and leave boring foliage. Well, all my mom ever wanted was a garden full of irises, but first we lived in a trailer next to guys who always trampled the tiny patch of green we had, and then we lived with Aunt Delia and Uncle Norm. So Mom never had her garden of irises. Except one year I made her one. I took a big plastic tub, like those storage bins, you know? I filled it with dirt and iris rhizomes in the fall, watered it, and prayed like hell until spring. I kept it behind the garage so my aunt wouldn't find it, and by some miracle the flowers came up. So I dragged the tub over to the house and parked it under my mom's window so she could watch them bloom." He smiled in memory. "She *loved* it. She cried and clapped her hands. She spent the whole month they bloomed, I swear, sitting at that window and looking at her flowers. My aunt went nuts, because they were eight or ten different colors, and here was this damn Rubbermaid in the middle of her yard, and the neighbors asked about it, and she didn't know what to say without making herself look bad. Oh God, she hated it. She hated *me* for it. But she left the tub until the blooms went away, and she promised Mom she'd plant them in a garden in the fall."

"Did she?" Mitch asked.

Sam shook his head. "Mom was too sick to notice anything by then. I was going to plant the tub again anyway, but she—" He stopped and took a drink of tea. "I made sure she had some for the funeral. And I had them burn them up with her when they cremated her."

"That's the container you have in your pack, right? What you let go at the Platte River?" He nodded along once Sam did. "That was sweet. You gonna do that the whole way?"

"I don't know," Sam admitted. "I hadn't thought about it—I just had those in my hand because I spilled them and was cleaning up when you called me out. It just seemed right."

"Well, if you ever want to stop, just say the word. I'll keep my eye out for irises, for sure."

The offer made Sam feel very warm and eased some of the sadness speaking about the irises had brought up. "Thanks."

Mitch cleared his throat. "So. Your uncle, was he sort of your dad to you then? Didn't you say you don't know your dad at all?"

"No idea who my dad is. I think my aunt might know, but even she isn't sure. But no, Uncle Norm really isn't the dad type. Anyway, he's not the dad I'd have wanted. He just sat there reading the paper until they got high-speed, and he's been on the computer ever since. Never asked about anything I was doing, just told me to pass the potatoes." He picked at the seam of his jeans. "I always wanted a dad like Emma's. God, he took her everywhere. Still does. They go on *dates*, they call them. Started when she was seven. They head out together every week, and if money is tight they just take a walk. When she was little, he went with her to every Disney movie, every ball game, and he even took her to see *NSYNC when they came to Des Moines. She rolls her eyes at that now, but I watched all that and just ached. It wasn't even what they did together. It was the way he looked at her, like everything she did was beautiful and amazing." He stopped picking at his jeans and rubbed at them instead. "It's not that my mom didn't pay attention to me, or love me, or tell me I was great. And I don't feel like I was cheated because I didn't have a dad. Okay, I do a little. But it's not just that. I mean—well, Mom was sick ever since I can remember. And she felt guilty, too much, when we couldn't do stuff. So sometimes I didn't tell her I was upset so that I didn't have to see her feel guilty. And it would have been nice to have a guy to explain a wet dream, to be honest. Somebody who actually knew." He sighed. "I don't know."

They drove a few miles in silence. They were heading into the mountains proper now, and Sam was starting to wonder if they were just going to go up forever, all the way to Cortez. He noticed Mitch had

downshifted and was going a lot slower now, and that Old Blue was working harder. A few cars were parked by the side of the road, steam billowing from beneath their hoods. Sam looked at Old Blue's nose worriedly, but the semi seemed fine, so far.

"My dad wasn't like Emma's dad," Mitch said, keeping his eyes firmly on the road. "Or even your uncle. He was… pretty nasty." Sam didn't know what to say to this, so he just waited, watching as Mitch tapped his thumbs on the wheel. Finally, Mitch reached for his Winstons. "Hit me a lot, especially after my mom left. But mostly he was really good at making me feel like shit. Called me names—loved to call me 'faggot', which scared the shit out of me, because I was starting to think maybe I was one, and I thought, 'shit, how does he know?' So I worked damn hard not to be a faggot, which, to my shame, means I was terrible mean to boys I knew were." He put a cigarette between his lips and shook his head, looking grim. "There was this one. God, he was so sweet and shy. I just looked at him and wanted to kiss him and touch him. Scared the piss out of me, so I bullied him. I was such an ass to him. I think he dropped out of school because of me. I tried to find him later, when we were adults, but I couldn't. Still wish I could." He lit the cigarette and took a long drag. "Pretty sure if I die and try to get to heaven, poor Gary Ingall will be standing in front of the gate, and I won't be able to go in for my shame." He smoked for a minute. "But all I knew when I was a kid was that I had to make sure I didn't drive my dad away, too, because he was all I had left. Eventually I grew enough brain cells to figure out he wasn't worth killing myself over."

Sam let all that swim in his head and realized, had he and Mitch gone to high school together, he would have been the Gary Ingall. The thought was sobering. But they couldn't have gone to school at the same time. "Thirty, you said you were?"

"Thirty-three," Mitch replied, a little grimly. "Old man."

"That isn't old!" Sam protested, laughing. Though it was, he acknowledged to himself, a significant difference to his age of twenty-one.

"Dead and buried in gay years." Mitch patted his stomach and looked down at it in disgust. "Old, flabby, and out to pasture." He cast Sam a wary look and shook his head. "Still don't know how the hell I

caught you. You should have run off with that Craig from last night. Or somebody even better."

"I'm not running off with a guy I met for two hours in a bar!" Sam cried, incredulous.

Mitch laughed. "But the trucker from the alley is just fine, is he?" When Sam blushed and stammered, Mitch sighed, put his cigarette into—God, there it was—a Butt Bucket, and reached for another. "Sorry, Sunshine. I don't know to quit when I'm ahead."

But he'd put the bee in Sam's bonnet now, as his mother would say, and Sam sat for a few minutes trying to work out why it was okay to run off with Mitch but why he didn't want to even just play around with Craig outside of the bar. "I wouldn't have run off with you that day in the alley," he said finally. "I still don't know why I even—I mean, it was just so… unexpected. And—well, you just seem safe. But not in a boring way." His face was so red it was hot. "And then you returned my iPhone. I mean, that was nice. Really nice. And you bought me dinner, and—and—" He sighed and tucked his legs against his chest. "Oh, I don't know."

Now Mitch was looking at him oddly. "So it wasn't about how I look at all? I could have been bald and fat?"

Sam thought immediately of Leon. "Well—I guess—I don't know, honestly." How did they get on this subject? How did he get out of it? "I *do* like how you look." *Big and strong*. "I—I guess it's more how you look at *me* that… attracts me." He put his hands on his cheeks. They were searing. Sam tried to think of how to deflect this conversation. "What about you?" he asked. "What attracted you to me?"

Mitch drew on his cigarette before answering. Sam half-expected him to tell him he'd thought he was hot, or something like that, but when Mitch finally spoke, he said, "The way you were dancing."

"Dancing? I wasn't—" Sam stopped, remembering how he'd boogied down as he tossed the boxes into the Dumpster. He blushed anew. "Oh God, that? You liked *that*?"

"I did," Mitch said, and he sounded serious. "You looked so damn happy. And cute, sure, but you were so happy. And then you turned around and looked at me, and I could tell you wanted me: that glowing, happy, handsome guy wanted me." He smiled ruefully and

shook his head before drawing on his cigarette again. "I didn't stand a chance."

Sam reveled in this for a moment, not quite knowing what to say. It should have made him feel good, and it did. But like a shadow, another comment Mitch had made about him surfaced, and it cast a pallor Sam couldn't ignore.

"You said I reminded you of someone," Sam said. "Is it that guy you traveled with?" Mitch's smile, predictably, faded, but Sam didn't let himself bow down. He wanted to know. The shadow deepened, and Sam added, "Did he make you feel happy too?"

Mitch smoked again, and was quiet for a few minutes. "Yeah. But in a different way, Sunshine."

Tell me about him, Sam thought, but couldn't say, because he wasn't sure he was ready to hear. He was too afraid he'd find out he could never keep up. But it killed him, not knowing. There was no denying that this guy still affected Mitch, because Sam only had to hint at him, and Mitch shut down. Like he was now.

Sam gave up. "Sorry." He slumped in his seat. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Don't worry about it," Mitch said, but he still sounded gruff to Sam.

"We can talk about something else, really." Sam's cheeks heated again. "Or you can just stop and get me a bucket of ice to stick my head in."

And at that, Mitch grinned. "Sure thing." He started to angle the truck toward a small gas station on the side of the road.

"I was kidding!" Sam said, sitting bolt upright in his seat.

Mitch shook his head, grinning wider. "Getting diesel, Sunshine." He put out his second cigarette and nodded at the building. "You want anything to eat, now that your stomach is settled a bit? This place makes decent breakfast burritos. I could grab you one. Or do you want to come in and poke your head around?"

Mitch had tensed a little even as he made the offer, and Sam remembered the last truck stop. But his legs were getting sore from sitting. "I'll come," he said, still blushing a little as he undid his belt and climbed down from the cab.

Sam realized they were in a sort of basin surrounded by mountains, and the gas station, while clearly catering to truckers, was very small when compared to the behemoths that had littered I-80. It was also much, much colder up here than it had been even in Denver, and Sam hurried inside to escape the wind. He used the restroom, then met Mitch at the small counter where a polite woman served them breakfast burritos. She gave them no dirty looks whatsoever. Sam had his burrito stuffed with sausage, egg, and green pepper, whereas Mitch filled his with beans, meat, jalapenos, and salsa, splashing hot sauce on top. They ate standing at the counter, Mitch surveying the magazines and notices.

Sam noticed a few truckers did give them odd looks, but he decided not to care. Mitch, he could see, did, and hurried through the rest of his food.

"I gotta give Blue a systems check before we head on," Mitch said as they headed back into the parking lot toward the semi. "You want to stretch your legs some more or hang out inside?"

Sam, already huddled against the wind, nodded to the cab. "I'll go back to Blue."

Was it Sam's imagination, or did Mitch look relieved? "TV might work, but the satellite's iffy up here." He looked sidelong at Sam. "Course, there's quite a video selection."

He seemed to enjoy it when Sam blushed, which was why Sam pushed his embarrassment aside and said, "I could watch the twink video, sort of preview it and see if they're kinky enough for you."

"You do that," Mitch said, sliding up beside him and taking a good, hard hold of his ass. "And be sure to give me a full report."

Sam's blood was humming from that exchange when he got in the truck, but he didn't break out the porn. Instead he unplugged his phone, tucked himself into the corner of the bed, and braved what he might find.

His signal was very bad, and there was no 3G, so he gave up reading his messages. After a few minutes of pretending he could get away with not doing it, he gave in and called Emma.

"Thank God," she said when she answered. "So, are you coming home?"

Sam looked out the window and watched Mitch as he checked dipsticks and cables. “No,” he said, and felt easier as the rightness of his answer permeated him.

“What—ever?” Emma asked, panicked.

“Not yet.” Sam toyed with the cord to the headphones. “I’ll come back eventually, Emma. I promise. And I’m fine. Really.” Mitch caught his eye and smiled, and he waved and smiled back. “In fact, I’m really, really good.”

“You do sound better,” Emma acknowledged reluctantly. “And God knows you deserve a vacation. Do you need money? Because I have some—”

“I don’t need money,” Sam said. “I’m okay. Really. I’m fine.”

“You have to text me every day,” she said fiercely. “And if anything goes wrong, *anything*—”

“If anything goes wrong, I’ll leave him,” Sam promised, “and call you first.”

“Okay then,” Emma said, slightly mollified. “Just take care of yourself, Sam. Please? It’s so lonely without you here.”

It felt good to hear that. “You should go ask Steve to console you,” he said. “Tell him how worried you are about me.”

“Actually,” she said, sounding crafty, “he’s the one who told me something had happened with Delia. He called me. Totally blew me out of the water. He’s pissed at her too. We talked for an hour. He was like a different person. Like he was totally letting go.” She sighed. “I just wish he would let go in other, more sexual ways. I want the man in my goddamned bed.”

Sam considered this. He remembered how cautious Steve always was, how he’d kept himself quiet while Delia shouted, but he also thought of how he’d called Em. “Maybe you should call him more.”

“I can’t have sex with him over the phone,” Emma snapped.

Sam just smiled. “You might be surprised. Think of it as foreplay.”

“Oh, like I could just tell him he’s sexy and that I want to grab his ass.” Emma sighed. “I *wish* I could. But then he’d really think I’m a whore. Maybe that’s it. Maybe he’s heard I’m easy.”

God, did they *all* suffer from this? “I think if he thought you were easy that he’d be in your pants already,” Sam said. “I know he’s not gay, so that’s out. And I can’t think of any other reason for a guy to say no to you.”

Emma blew him a kiss. “Miss you, Sam.”

Sam smiled. “I miss you, too, Em.”

“Then come home.”

“I will,” he promised.

Once he hung up, he sat in the seat for awhile, looking out at the mountains. He played a few games, then gave up and watched the sky again, thinking. The mountains were snowcapped, rugged, and beautiful. Sam smiled, feeling quiet, sated, and safe.

When the silence pressed on him, he scrolled through his music, finally selecting a playlist that was mellow but still had some Kylie on it. He realized they’d driven all the way from Denver in total silence, except for their talking. He couldn’t think of the last time he’d been so happy *not* listening to music, especially in a car. They weren’t awkward anymore, either.

Things were looking up.

Mitch climbed into the cab, rubbing his hands on a rag. He nodded at Sam as he saw him hooking the iPhone up to the stereo.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Ready.” Sam settled back, letting the music wrap around him as Mitch pulled Old Blue back onto the highway and into the mountains once again.

Chapter 8

THE road through the mountains was absolutely beautiful.

Mitch had warned him that it would take all day just to get even close to Cortez, but Sam had never been more grateful for a long drive in his life. He snapped several pictures with his iPhone, but he knew they would never come close to capturing what he was seeing with his own eyes. It was as if the world were smaller and bigger at once, closer because of the mountains, and yet the sky was a huge expanse above his head. The towns were charming, small, and tucked like spare change into whatever corners they could fit. And there were ranches, real honest-to-God *ranches*, with signs and cowboys and everything. There were wide, clear, rushing streams that were nothing like the mucky, muddy rivers back home. There were no irises, but Mitch did stop beside a large patch of columbine, which Sam was sure his mother would have loved, and he dusted them liberally with her ashes.

The one thing Sam could have lived without were the winding roads.

Most of the time the roads were just bendy, but as the day wore on and they snaked deeper into the mountains, the roads became narrower and higher against the sides of the peaks they climbed. Mitch pointed out the tree line to Sam, the place so high in elevation not even the evergreens could survive, because the atmosphere was too thin. Sam was impressed by this, but in an increasingly less favorable way as that line began to creep lower and lower outside his window.

"*We're* okay, right?" He stared worriedly up at the bare rock and snow. "I mean—we can breathe long enough to pass—obviously?"

"Don't worry, Sunshine. There will be plenty of air."

Sam tried to take reassurance in Mitch's confidence, and he told himself that *obviously* they would not build a road so high travelers couldn't breathe, but he found he was nurturing a quiet panic inside himself the higher they went. They were in a national forest now, and while there were still homes and towns, they were fewer and farther between.

Then they passed a sign that read, WOLF CREEK PASS AHEAD: TRUCKERS CHECK YOUR BRAKES.

Sam turned to Mitch in alarm. "The sign—did we—?"

"Did my brake check back in Del Norte." He caught the look on Sam's face, and his own expression changed to surprise. "Sam—honey, are you okay?"

"Fine," Sam said faintly, and he tightened his fingers against his armrest.

But if he'd thought the road was winding before, he soon realized he hadn't seen anything until now.

The road *climbed* the mountain, weaving back and forth along the side like a ribbon against the side of a cake. And there was really no rail. Oh, sometimes there was a little metal suggestion, but mostly there was just the sheer edge and a drop down into hell below. There were rocks along the side of the road too. Several of them were very large, and one was as tall as Old Blue . There were also signs advising motorists, WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK.

Mitch was driving more slowly now, keeping all his focus on the road and his driving as he shifted gears and watched gauges. They climbed higher and higher, weaving first one way and back the next, sometimes hugging the side of the mountain, sometimes the edge. And as they went higher, Old Blue went slower, and slower, and slower. Sam looked out the window and saw, not just the tree line a short walk up the side of the peak, but snow on the ground all the way up through the brush.

"Here's the top," Mitch said, and he started shifting again, and Sam saw the same slope they had climbed open up in reverse before them, felt the weight of the rig pushing on them from behind as Mitch fought it off with gears and feet, and Sam realized in one, cold moment

of terror the reason for the sign admonishing the truckers to check their brakes.

Was that a burning smell?

Was that smell the *brakes?*

"Oh God," Sam whispered, and he felt his body freeze.

There was a moment of strange, white silence and even whiter light, and then he heard a voice as if from very far away. It became louder and sharper, and suddenly he was back in Old Blue, and they were pitching slowly down a mountain road, and Mitch was shouting at him.

"*Sam!* Jesus—Sam, are you okay? *Sam!*"

Sam nodded and pushed some words out of his throat. "Mitch—I—" But then the terror swept him up again, and he couldn't say anything more.

Mitch shifted his gear, and the grinding sent Sam into shivers. "Sam, are you hurt, or are you scared?"

Sam made a few unsuccessful attempts to say "scared," then he gave up on the letter S and said, in a pathetic whisper, "Not h-h-hurt."

Even through his terror Sam could see Mitch's body sag in relief. "Okay, Sam, just relax. I have done this before. I have done this more times than I can count. Sunshine, I have done the Red Mountain Pass in a rig and in winter—this is a fucking cakewalk by comparison."

Sam tried to nod, not really able to process what Mitch was saying, but liking the sound of his voice. He tried shutting his eyes, but that just made it easy to imagine the truck sliding off the edge. He looked at the ceiling, but he could see the side of the mountain rushing by out of the edge of his vision. Looking straight on was out, because that was what had sent him into hysterics in the first place.

"Stay with me, Sam," Mitch called, and Sam turned toward him as if he were a beacon. He felt calmer instantly, partly because it was Mitch, strong and sure and solid, but also because while the view beyond him was the valley, it was the higher part, and it wasn't swooping by but drifting, and it allowed Sam to pretend, a little, that they weren't separated from death by little more than the pressure applied by Mitch's feet.

"I'm sorry," Sam whispered, too scared to feel truly foolish, but able to acknowledge that he'd upset Mitch.

"You should have told me you were scared," Mitch said. He was still very focused on the road, but he glanced at Sam when he could. "I could have explained it to you."

"I—" Sam swallowed the metallic tang of more fear. "I feel it pushing. The truck."

"It's a heavy load," Mitch explained. "And this is a steep grade. In a car it isn't such a big deal, but I'm a little like a short train. I can't stop suddenly. So I have to keep Blue going nice and slow and steady. But I know how, Sam. There isn't much in the world I'm truly good at, but this, I will confidently tell you, I am."

Sam nodded, and as if to prove his trust, turned and took another look at the road. The winding parts were getting a little longer, but he saw strange gravel ramps occasionally running up the side of the hill, sometimes with huge yellow barrels at the end. "What are those?" he asked.

"Runaway truck ramps," Mitch said. "*Don't go green on me, Sam.* They're for safety. In case of emergency."

In case the brakes fail. Sam turned away from the road and back to Mitch. "Have you ever had to use one?"

"Once," Mitch admitted, "On one of my first mountain runs. Didn't do a brake check, and didn't quite get the idea of how hard I had to work to keep my rig under control. But never again, Sam. Not one time since. Rigs go over the Divide on all manner of passes, all day every day. You might as well worry about being hit on I-80 in Nebraska. Possible, but unlikely, and it's just a risk you take along the way."

Sam nodded, and kept his eyes on Mitch.

"Just don't think about it, Sam," he said. "Think about something else."

"Okay," Sam agreed quietly. But nothing came to mind.

"Ask me questions," Mitch said. "Anything."

Sam tried to think of something. "What's the kitty litter for?" he whispered.

"Kitty litter?" Mitch frowned and then laughed. "Oh, in the cupboard. For winter, on the ice, if I get stuck."

Sam's hands tightened on his seat. "There's snow now," he whispered. "On the side."

"It's okay," Mitch said, gentling him. "It's okay, Sam. I swear. Forget the questions. Tell me more about your mom," he urged. "Tell me what she'd tell you right now, if she knew you were taking your first trip west after all these years."

Sam tried to imagine his mother, sitting in her chair, listening. "She'd like it," he said, his eyes falling down now to Mitch's arms, and legs, not the window. "She'd say, 'Good for you, Sammy'."

"Hope she wouldn't be too upset by your escort," Mitch said.

Sam smiled, a little. "She'd like you."

"Were you out, to your mom?"

Sam nodded. "She was in PFLAG and everything, until she got cancer." The memory warmed him. "I told her when I was ten, not really realizing what I was doing at the time. I was staring at a boy on the playground, and Mom wheeled over, upset because I had a funny look on my face, and she thought the other boy had made fun of me. I don't know why I said it out loud—I just remember being so caught up in him, like it was a spell, and then Mom asked if he'd hit me, and I was so shocked that I just turned to her and said, 'No, Mom—I just wish I could kiss him'."

Mitch laughed, quietly. "And what did your mom say?"

"Nothing, for about ten minutes. Then she took me to the store and had me pick out my favorite ice cream and anything I wanted for sundaes, which was awesome, because that *never* happened, not like that. I always had to pick one thing and only the brand on sale. So I picked *everything*. I made the most disgusting sundae ever, with four kinds of ice cream and five kinds of sauce and ten cherries, and ate it with a huge whipped cream grin as mom sat across from me at the kitchen table and asked me if I thought about kissing boys a lot while she ate my sundae along with me."

It did feel good, to talk about his mom. Sam smiled as he went on. "I was a little nervous, but then she just passed me more fudge, which somehow made it okay, so I said, 'Yeah, actually'. And she just nodded, and asked if I wanted to kiss girls, too, or just boys. That one felt like a trap, but she looked so calm, and so I told her, no, just boys. And she just nodded, dug in with her spoon again, and asked me what I

liked best about boys. That threw me, until she said she liked big, strong men—what about me? And I didn't know, so I said, 'Me too', but I remember feeling good, like it was okay. I hadn't really acknowledged to myself it was or wasn't, not until then, but she made it okay, and then it was. When we were out of ice cream, she dished out more, and as we made slightly more sane sundaes, she asked me if other boys at school knew I wanted to kiss them. I said, 'No!' and she just nodded, and told me that was fine, but when I felt like I wanted to let people know to tell her, and she'd be happy to help me figure out what might be the best way. So we finished our ice cream, and when I went to bed that night, I lay there a long time, looking up at the ceiling, thinking. Finally I thought, 'Well, that's it. I guess I'm gay'. Then I went to bed."

Mitch had been smiling through most of the story, and when Sam finished, he glanced briefly at him. "I like your Mom."

Sam smiled back. "Me too."

Mitch nodded at the road, still smiling. "We're down, Sunshine."

Sam turned, and sure enough, the road ahead of them was evening out into just a regular decline now, and just up ahead Sam saw the edges of a town. He let out a breath and sagged into his seat as Mitch drove on.

When he pulled off at the side of the road, though, near a small store, Sam blushed, thinking of how stupid he had been up on the pass, and when Mitch unbuckled and stepped over the console toward the curtain, Sam stood and held out his hands.

"Mitch, I'm so sorry," he began but lost the rest of his apology as Mitch took Sam's face in his hands, brought his mouth down, and kissed him.

Sam stilled, then melted, sliding his hands up until he found Mitch's shoulders. He hung on as Mitch opened his mouth over Sam's, and Sam answered the kiss with the same intensity of passion. Every thought, all his fear, and most of his brain cells fled at the touch of Mitch Tedsoe's tongue against his own. He made soft sounds in the back of his throat, and he kneaded at Mitch's shirt, digging for his skin. He pressed his body against Mitch's, feeling his heat, his strength, but his softness too. It was headier than anything Sam had ever known. Sam gave himself over to this wonderful new moment, marveling at himself, at how he seemed to know just the right blend of aggression

and submission, fueling the kiss, reveling in the way Mitch's hands stroked the sides of his face and the taste of his lover's mouth.

When they broke apart, it was Mitch who pulled away, nuzzling Sam a bit until at last he let him go, and after one last squeeze of Sam's hand, Mitch parted through the curtain and headed toward the bathroom. When he came back out, he was quiet, which suited Sam fine, because he didn't know what to say, after that.

They stopped that night in Durango, making a sort of camp in a parking lot near a warehouse Mitch knew the owner of, and after a picnic of microwave meals and snacks from the cupboard, Mitch settled in with a Bohemia and Sam with a bottle of mineral water. Lying twined together on the brand new sheets, they broke into the porn.

They started, at Mitch's suggestion, with the truckers.

It was disappointing. The production was very low budget, and they wasted too much time on bad plot. The sex was good, but kind of stupid, as it mostly just had a truck in the background. The truckers didn't look like any of the truckers Sam had seen at all. It was just some guy fucking another guy in front of a fender, or getting a blow job, or doing really gross kissing that should have been hot, but all Sam could think of was the kiss after the pass, and these didn't compare. The only thing exciting about the movie was the way Mitch's hand was skimming over his hip.

"I clearly don't know how to pick porn," Sam said, and he craned his head back to look at Mitch. "Let's watch yours."

Mitch brushed a kiss across Sam's forehead and disentangled himself to comply with Sam's request.

Twink Kink was a lot better. It started with a young man with a slight build, smooth chest and dark hair walking alone through a neighborhood at night. Two men appeared out of nowhere, kidnapped him, and took him to their sexual dungeon, where they stripped him naked and had their way with him, which after a few moments of protest, he completely enjoyed.

Sam did too. Not just because it was hot, but because he quickly found himself mirroring what was on the screen. When the kidnappers ran their hands over the boy's body, Mitch's hands roved over Sam's chest and beneath his shirt to stroke his skin. When they attached nipple clamps to the boy—well, first, Sam flinched, and then he gasped as

Mitch took first one of Sam's nipples and then the other between his fingers. When they tied the captive's hands above his head, Sam lifted his own without prompting and let Mitch pin them behind his head.

Soon he was naked and writhing in Mitch's arms, gasping and arching and crying out along with his counterpart on the screen. And when the on-screen twink's torturers untied his hands and sent him to the floor, holding their engorged cocks before his mouth, Sam turned, slid down Mitch's body, and fought with the fastenings of his lover's jeans.

In the end he managed to get them off completely and took Mitch in his mouth, not looking up so he could shut his eyes and imagine he was the twink in the video with two strangers forcing him to act on his own lust. He nursed on Mitch's cock until Mitch was tugging at Sam's hair. Then he shifted to Mitch's balls, suckling one, then the other, and then took both into his mouth before pushing gently on Mitch's thighs and sliding down to his perineum. Then, riding along with the gasps of the boy on the screen, Sam went all the way down.

He had never had his mouth on anyone here. He told himself not to be nervous or paranoid of germs. Still, he gave Mitch's anus one quick swipe with the sheets as a sort of consolation before pressing his thumbs against the edge of Mitch's opening. Finally, bending his head, Sam pushed his tongue against Mitch's heat.

Mitch's reaction was heady. Even that small touch made him shudder and reach for Sam's head. With a fist full of his hair in his hand, Mitch pushed Sam's face right back against his pucker. It felt good to have Mitch be the one panting and shaking after Sam had practically melted down the side of the mountain. Sam forgot his hesitation and gave over, laving first in a circle, then poking, then circling again, and finally, heart pounding, he pulled Mitch's cheeks apart with his thumbs and inserted his tongue. *Warm*. It was hot, even, and soft, and Mitch's opening was trembling around his tongue, pushing it out, but when Sam spread him, it opened for him. All the while Sam worked, Mitch clutched at him and made frightening, beautiful sounds. Sam lost himself in his work, poking and licking and pressing, until suddenly Mitch shouted, loudly, and bucked and seized, and then he was pulling Sam back up, through his legs, over his stomach, and toward his face.

He kissed Sam roughly, his hands trembling as he thrust his tongue into Sam's mouth with more force than Sam could prepare for. Then he withdrew and turned Sam over, pinning him to his sticky chest with one arm as his other hand reached down to stroke Sam's cock. Up on the video screen, the twink had been tied up again, but this time to a bench, and he was grunting and gasping around two cocks, one in his mouth and one in his very red ass.

Mitch put Sam's hand on his own cock and urged him into a hard rhythm before letting go and running his hand between them. As Sam continued to masturbate and watch his counterpart get fucked on the screen, Mitch reached down, spread Sam open, and slipped a semen-slick finger inside him.

"Oh," Sam cried, lifting his legs and spreading them when Mitch reclaimed control of his cock with one hand as the other started to move inside of Sam.

He masturbated Sam slowly, a sort of punishment that went along with the torture the kidnappers were giving the twink on the screen. They had stopped fucking him and started flogging him, swatting him first with a paddle and then a crop. Sam thought the twink should be screaming, but he was just moaning and sounding like he was having a gay old horny time. He was eager, too, as they untied him and mounted him on one of the attackers who had lain down on the floor. But as Sam watched, the other man came up from behind him, and then—

"Oh God," Sam whispered, his chest heaving as he realized what was about to happen. "They're both—*both—at once—!*"

"Would you like that, Sunshine?" Mitch whispered, twisting a finger inside of him. "Would you like to take two cocks at once?"

Sam shuddered. *No, no, no. It would hurt.* But he watched the agonized rapture on the twink's face on screen and remembered how it felt to have Craig before him and Mitch behind him, and he moaned. "Yes."

The next thing Sam knew, he was on the floor, on his knees, and cold lube was sliding into his ass. He felt the dildo pushing against his entrance.

"Mitch," he rasped, suddenly scared. "I—"

"Not tonight," Mitch agreed, gruffly. "But something close."

Close? And then Sam felt the dildo sliding into him, and he moaned. When Mitch pushed him down so that he sat on his legs, he went, turning his cheek to rest against the floor as Mitch took first one arm and then the other and tucked them back beside Sam's feet. *Like the spreader,* Sam thought, gasping as Mitch forced his legs apart, shoved two fingers in alongside the dildo, and began to fuck him.

It was not a double fucking, but it was quite a lot, and it was different, and it was lewd and hot and very, very slutty, and Sam made a symphony of incoherent noises before coming, violently against the steel floor. He lay panting and twitching as Mitch gave him a few last pumps, withdrew, then and gathered Sam in his arms, drawing him back toward the bed.

The television was off, the cab was dark, and the night was silent around them as Mitch held Sam in his arms, cradling him to his chest, placing soft kisses on Sam's eyebrows. After awhile he stilled, and then, with almost no warning, Mitch went to sleep.

Sam looked up at him in the shadow. He thought of all that had happened that day, of how he had woken hung over in Denver, driven into the mountains, panicked on the pass, and was now here, sated and safe in Mitch's arms. He felt so far from home, as if he were on another planet, except when he looked up at Mitch's face. When he looked there, he knew that he was home.

His feelings swelled inside him, a joy and sorrow at once, a terror more intense than any mountain pass. Sam shut his eyes and placed a tender kiss against the center of Mitch's chest.

MITCH, Sam was starting to realize, always woke early. He was stirring at five, and by five-thirty he'd dressed, eaten, made coffee in a pot Sam hadn't even known he'd had, and was trying to get the Internet on his laptop.

"Stay in bed," he told Sam when he sat up.

Sam fell back onto his pillow. "Checking your mail?"

"Looking for jobs. Trying to, anyway." He grimaced and shut the laptop. "Can't get a signal, though. No free or pay Wi-Fi. Only bad thing about the mountains."

Sam pointed at the front of the cab. “Get me my phone.” He took it from Mitch, poked around a bit, then handed it to him. “Slower than dial-up, but it’s Internet.”

“How do I use it?” Mitch asked, mystified, and Sam crawled to the floor, dragging the blanket with him as he leaned against Mitch and showed him.

Mitch was pleased. “Thanks, Sunshine.” He ruffled Sam’s hair and looped his arm around his shoulders, gently pinning him in place as he used the phone to surf.

Sam watched, groggy but comfortable. “Where are we going today?”

“That’s what I’m trying to suss out.” He rubbed his thumb against Sam’s naked shoulder absently as he waited for a page to load. “I thought somebody might have a load for Phoenix, but there’s nothing.” He frowned. “Just loads to Vegas.”

“Oh?” Sam said, perking up.

Mitch continued to frown. “I’ll find one somewhere else. If I take a load to Phoenix, I *know* I can get a load to LA right off.”

But after several minutes of searching, Mitch was swearing. There was nothing to Phoenix. Just to Vegas.

“We can make it quick, I guess,” he said, rubbing at his jaw. “Just be there for a few hours. It might be okay.”

Sam tipped his head back and looked up at Mitch. “Why don’t you want to go to Vegas?”

Mitch pursed his lips. “Bad memories.”

But that wasn’t it, Sam could tell. This was the same look he got when Sam said the wrong thing, or when they got too kinky. This was what always tied Mitch up inside. And suddenly, Sam knew. “It’s him, isn’t it?” he asked. “The guy you keep talking about. He’s in Vegas.”

Mitch pressed his lips tighter together and nodded before reaching over and ruffling Sam’s hair again. “Don’t worry about it, Sunshine.”

But Sam did. He slipped out of Mitch’s hold and climbed to his knees, taking the sheet with him until he was at the bathroom, where he gave up and dropped it. He used the toilet, splashed water on his face, pausing to look in the small mirror posted over the mini-sink. He needed to shave—he actually had a tiny bit of beard. He stroked the

whiskers, wondering if he had time to deal with them. He touched his chest, too, rubbing at the few wiry hairs there, thinking of the smooth-skinned boy in the video.

He thought of the nameless, faceless man in Vegas who kept getting in his way.

Sam ran wet fingers through his hair, doing his best to tame the mess and went back out into the cab. He hesitated a moment, retrieved his sheet, and went back to the bed, where he sat and tried to gather enough courage to speak.

"I want to go to Vegas," he said.

Mitch glanced up at him, wary. "Why?"

Sam lifted his chin a little. "I want to meet him. This guy."

Mitch's expression didn't just shutter: it turned cold. "No."

"Then tell me about him," Sam said, because he'd been prepared for a refusal. "Tell me what went so wrong. Tell me, so I don't do it too."

"You will never," Mitch said with feeling, "be like Randy."

A name. Sam latched onto it, a precious bit of treasure. "Tell me about him. Tell me about your past, Mitch. Tell me, please."

"No," Mitch said sharply. He sighed and rubbed at his cheeks. "Don't do this, Sunshine. Just leave things be."

I can't. He keeps getting in the way. Or something did. Sam had to know. He had to understand.

But what would he find out?

Mitch looked at him and grimaced. "Shit."

"Sorry." Sam rose, taking his sheet with him, heading for the coffee pot, not because he wanted some but because he had to move, had to not look at Mitch or let him look at him. "I shouldn't have brought this up. It was a stupid idea."

He yelped when Mitch grabbed him, and the air went out of him as he came down into Mitch's lap. Mitch took his face in one hand, holding it in place as he looked down at Sam with a stilted expression. His jaw tightened as he ran his thumb over Sam's cheekbone, but he didn't say anything, just looked at him, like he was trying to read the secrets of his face.

Sam tried to turn his face away, but Mitch held him fast, so he looked down. "I'm sorry—" he said again but stopped talking as Mitch kissed him. He melted into him immediately, opening for him, sliding his hand up his arm. But as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

"I'll take you," he said, tucking Sam's head toward him so that Sam's head was pressed against his cheek. He stroked the side of Sam's face in a tender gesture that was so unlike him that Sam jumped. He lowered his hand, chastised. "Just… try and keep an open mind, will you, Sunshine?"

Sam pulled back and looked Sam in the eye. "Open mind? About what?"

"Just generally open," Mitch said.

Sam had to push down a queasy feeling in his belly. "You're freaking me out, Mitch."

Mitch smiled sadly and tweaked Sam's nose. "Good." He handed Sam his phone and climbed to his feet. "So. I'll call the place here in Durango that has a load, and we'll see what we see."

They ended up having to go to Cortez and backtrack to Durango, because instead of a load straight to Vegas, Mitch got one going via Flagstaff, and it was bigger, so they had to dump their Cortez load completely first. Sam was embarrassed when he found out Mitch had done this partly so Sam wouldn't have to go over the mountains again right away.

"I would have been able to handle it," Sam insisted.

"I don't want you to hate the mountains. Give yourself a few days to recover before you tackle them again." Mitch shrugged. "Anyway, I thought you might like to see the Grand Canyon."

Sam sat up. "Seriously?"

"Has to be quick," Mitch warned, "and can't be at the main viewing areas. But if we come in from Cameron, you can watch it open up and hop out at one of the smaller points."

Sam nodded, forgetting the awkwardness of Vegas in light of this announcement. The Grand Canyon! He hadn't even considered that would be an option. Anticipation made him feel bouncy inside, distracting him until Mitch angled the rig toward the warehouse drive.

"I'll help you load," Sam said, undoing his seatbelt.

Mitch put out a hand to stay him. “You can’t, Sunshine.”

“Mitch, I’m a stock boy,” he argued. “I can lift things.”

“It’s regulation,” Mitch said, apologetic. “Has to do with insurance and labor laws.” But he looked guilty too. And Sam was convinced, in that moment, that Mitch was keeping him inside on purpose.

Hiding him.

Sam wished he hadn’t thought of that. “Well—can I do anything to help in here?”

“Just hang loose,” Mitch said. “I promise I won’t be long.”

Sam fell back in his seat, watching as Mitch climbed out and started talking to the manager or whatever you called the guy who ran the warehouse. Sam picked up his phone and scrolled through the archaically paced Internet awhile before giving up and putting the phone down. He put some new coffee on. He ate a peanut butter sandwich. He picked up his phone again, sent a laborious text to Em. He poked his head out, saw they were just getting ready to load, and decided to take a shower. Mitch had refilled it in Cortez and drained the toilet. Sam had tried to help with this, too, but Mitch had just sent him with a list and a wad of twenties to the grocery store. *I feel like the little woman,* Sam thought, shutting his eyes beneath the spray.

Just keep an open mind.

Sam had attempted to avoid thinking about what that might mean, but as he toweled his hair and slipped into his now not very clean jeans and his last clean shirt, it was hard to think of anything else. Dramatic scenarios crept up like dandelions no matter what he did, and the more he tried to mow them down, the thicker they came back. It wasn’t just this Randy guy. It was something more. And the more he thought about it, the worse he imagined it to be. By the time Mitch finally came back into the rig, Sam was a small and quiet wreck. He helped Mitch tidy things up and put the coffee pot away, but once they were back on the road, he only lasted about twenty miles before his dark thoughts bubbled up again.

“Are you married?” he asked Mitch, and he held his breath as he waited for the answer.

Mitch startled so bad he spilled his coffee. “What the fuck, Sam!” He replaced the cup in the holder and shook the liquid off his hand. “No, I’m not married!”

Sam nodded, tersely. That was the worst one. “Drug runner?”

Mitch gave him a long, strange look. “Sam?”

“I just want to know what it is I’m supposed to keep an open mind about,” he said, relieved he managed to keep his voice even.

Mitch’s posture eased at once, but not completely. “Jesus. You’re barking up the wrong trees, Sunshine. And you watch too damn much TV.”

“Then *what is it?* Mitch, I’m going crazy.”

Mitch didn’t answer for almost a minute. He wiped at his mouth, tapped his thumb against the wheel, then nodded curtly. “Give me a little bit to figure out how to word it?”

“Okay,” Sam agreed, feeling awkward and guilty, though he didn’t know why. He settled into his seat to wait, but several miles went by, and Mitch didn’t say anything. *He isn’t planning to,* Sam realized, and felt frustrated, then angry, and then simply tired.

He turned in his seat and watched the road go by.

The landscape was changing rapidly. They were still in the mountains, though the terrain was looking a lot more rugged, and the vegetation was starting to thin. Mitch pointed out some mountains in the distance and told Sam they hid the ruins of cliff-dwelling houses, and that there were in fact a lot of Native American artifacts in this area.

“You can hike in a lot of the preserves,” Mitch said.

“Have you ever?” Sam asked, but Mitch just shook his head.

“Wouldn’t mind, someday,” he confessed. And after this they lapsed back into silence.

They drove through the backside of some city—Sam lost track of where they were—and into road construction that made Mitch swear a lot under his breath as he had to balance Old Blue on a very, very narrow shoulder near a drop that wasn’t very big, but enough to make Sam feel a bit sick, and after a few miles when Mitch suggested he go lie down, Sam did. Though he didn’t mean to, he slept, and when he woke, he came back to the front of the cab, and he stopped short.

"Oh!" he said, looking around. "What—what is this?"

"Desert," Mitch said. "We entered the Navajo Nation awhile back. You missed Four Corners, I have to tell you."

"But there aren't any cactus, or anything! There's *nothing* here." Sam sank into his seat, wide-eyed and shaking his head. "It looks like a wasteland."

"Now you know why the government didn't mind giving it to the Navajo," Mitch replied.

Sam sat back. There was *nothing* around them. Nothing at all. Occasionally there would be a sad, solitary trailer far off near a crop of rock, but there was rarely a road from the highway toward it, and often no car, either. Even fueling stations were rare. There were just miles and miles of desert with the occasional rock formation. Sam found himself almost wishing for Wolf Creek Pass, which while terrifying, was at least beautiful and less lonely. He wondered if he even had cell service out here, but he was afraid to check.

It was a two-lane road only, which meant they sometimes got caught behind slow vehicles. Sam noticed, though, that they were often the vehicle people backed up behind before passing on a straight, flat stretch.

"This isn't Arizona jurisdiction," Mitch said when Sam commented on it. "If we get picked up for speeding, it will be by Res cops. And while I don't begrudge them their attitude, I don't want to feel the brunt of it. It'll add some time, but we won't find any trouble, either, if we go the limit."

Sam could hardly argue with that, but it did make for a long, barely bearable ride. Mitch only stopped once, and that was to use the bathroom and take a walk around the outside of the rig. He'd had a cigarette while he was out there, and he had another one once he was inside. Once he put it out, he reached over, turned down the music Sam had put on, and began to speak.

"The thing is," he began, deliberate about keeping his eyes on the road even though it was nothing but a straight line all the way to the horizon, "I used to be a really a different kind of person."

Sam settled into his seat, turning a little to look at Mitch. "Okay," he said.

Mitch shook his head. “You saw a little of it in Denver, especially when we were at the bar.”

Sam almost grinned. “Mitch, is this the sex stuff? Because—”

“Just let me get this out, Sunshine.” He reached for another cigarette and took his time to light it and inhale. “You don’t seem to care so much that I’m older than you. But it matters, Sam, because in the years between when I was your age and now, I did a lot of stupid shit.” He took another drag and shook his head. “And I did a lot of it in Vegas.”

With Randy, Sam added, silently.

“If we don’t run into anybody,” Mitch went on, “it won’t matter. But if we do—” He flattened his lips and tapped out some ash. “Hell. I knew I couldn’t do this right.”

“Mitch,” Sam said, “I don’t care—”

“Well, you should,” Mitch snapped. “And even if you don’t, I do. I see how you look at me, Sam, and I know what you’re doing, and it makes me feel like hell. Maybe that’s why I’m different with you.” He took another drag, and Mitch noticed his hand was shaking a little. “You can’t understand, Sunshine, because you’re so young. And don’t tell me you’re not that young. You are. I was pissy, too, when I was twenty and people told me I had a lot to learn. Then I hit twenty-seven and knew what they were talking about.”

“I’m twenty-*one*,” Sam said stiffly. *What was he doing that made Mitch feel like hell?*

Mitch laughed. “Yeah. That’s worse, because now you’re legal in every way, so you think it’s over: all you have to do now is crack the nut of the world, and it’s yours.”

How the hell did all this become about him, Sam wanted to know? He turned back to the road, trying not to be angry, because that seemed to be what Mitch expected. It was hard. “So tell me how I look at you that makes you so upset, and I’ll stop.”

“Like I hung the moon,” Mitch said bitterly.

Sam’s blush was swift and hot. “How rude of me.” He rubbed at his cheeks, but that only made it worse, so he turned his face away, ignoring the fact that his blush had spread to his neck and arms. It was all too close to the bone, and it hurt, puncturing that perfect moment when Mitch had held him after the pass. He picked at his sleeve. “I

suppose now you'll tell me that I've turned you into some fucked-up father image."

"Shit," Mitch murmured. "I knew I'd screw this up, which was why I didn't want to talk about it."

"Well, if you've been thinking of me as some stupid kid, I wish you would have let me off in Denver, or never picked me up." Sam's blush was like ocean waves, getting him in deeper with every beat of the conversation. His chest hurt too. "Though since you kept fucking me, *you're* the sick bastard." Unless he thought Sam was throwing himself at him. Sam drew his knees to his chest and buried his face in them. "Oh God."

"I don't think of you as some stupid kid," Mitch shot back, sharper than Sam had ever heard him speak. "But yeah, I am a sick bastard."

Sam was too overcome by his own emotions to know what to say. He felt guilty, and angry, and mostly very, very confused. Nothing Mitch had said made sense. It explained nothing whatsoever about why he was supposed to keep an open mind in Vegas, and it didn't tell him anything about this Randy.

The desert began to feel even wider, empty, and more desolate.

They stopped at a place that called itself a trading post, and Mitch fueled the rig again. He encouraged Sam to get out and walk around, and the place did look interesting in a horribly, kitschy tourist sort of way. But Sam only shook his head and stayed where he was.

"I'm not going to leave you here," Mitch said.

"I know that," Sam shot back.

"Go on," Mitch urged him. "We got another hour before we get to the canyon. I'll meet you inside. I want to check things again, but I wouldn't mind poking around a bit too."

Sam went, but he didn't really enjoy himself, even though it was the wonder of the truck stop mall on crack. He'd never seen so many souvenirs in one place, some of them tacky, some of them beautiful. There was a restaurant, too, and somewhere apparently there was a hotel. They sold hats, and mugs, and Native American dolls, and fudge, and stuffed animals, and magnetic rocks, and jewelry. It was all amazing, and wild, and weird, and wonderful. And he didn't care,

because all he could think about was how things had gone so wrong with Mitch.

But then he found a selection of beautiful blue glass items, and he forgot even about Mitch. They were so delicate, so intricate. They were full of rainbows: little pots and vases and plates made of glass. He picked up a tiny chest and thought, *Mom would have loved this.*

Sam felt immediately full of a despair so great he almost dropped the glass trinket on the floor. Replacing the chest with blurry vision, Sam went back outside and sat on a bench to wait.

He startled when someone sat beside him, and his chest hurt as he realized he was almost upset that it was Mitch.

"Here," Mitch said, handing him a package of foil. "It's a Navajo taco."

Sam started to protest that he wasn't hungry, but he smelled the meat and was immediately starving. He opened the foil and frowned. "It doesn't look anything like a taco."

"No," Mitch agreed, opening one of his own. "But it's good."

It was, Sam conceded, as he ate. It was also huge. He barely finished half of it. Even Mitch couldn't finish all of his.

"You can save it if you want," Mitch said, "but I'll warn you, they're not so great the second go-round. Bread gets all mushy."

Sam nodded, woodenly, and tossed the remainder of his away.

"I got some fudge," Mitch offered, but Sam shook his head.

"Not hungry," he said, and headed back to the truck. Mitch followed, and they walked in silence, Sam feeling more miserable than ever. But as he stepped onto the running board, a hard, sharp wave of regret hit him, and he stopped.

"I need to go back inside," he said, and without waiting for Mitch to agree or argue, he turned and all but ran back to the trading post, heading back toward the rainbow glass.

The chest was expensive, almost so much that he had to write it off, but when he looked at it, all he could see was his mom. And when he touched it, he swore he could feel her. It was probably just his fancy, because after all these years of wishing for something like that, this was the closest he'd ever come to it, and he knew he was emotional now and likely to invent things to comfort himself. Still, he would take what

he could get. He kept the tears that threatened at bay this time, letting the comfort of her wash over him, so grateful for it just now. And he knew that even if it were twice as much, he'd be purchasing it. He picked it up, cradled it carefully, and headed to the register.

Mitch caught up with him on the way, and Sam stiffened when he saw him reach for his wallet.

"No," Sam said sharply, then forced himself to soften. "I'm getting this myself." And he did, using his credit card, consoling himself by pointing out that he hadn't spent so much as a dime of his own money so far. Of course, if he left Mitch, that would soon change. He shut the thought down, watched the brilliant rainbow-filled blue glass disappear beneath the protective wrapping the clerk put it in, and, then carried it as if it were the most fragile of eggs all the way back to the cab. But once they were inside, Mitch took it from him.

"I have a safe place for it, if you'll let me," he said, and Sam nodded.

They were quiet again as they got back on the road. They'd turned from the highway and were winding now very deep into the Navajo Nation. And after about half an hour, Mitch pointed off into the distance.

"That's the start of it," he said, pointing into the valley. "Watch that ravine."

Sam did, underwhelmed at first, but as he kept his eye on the crack in the earth and the miles continued to go by, it grew larger, and larger, and larger, until he was sitting forward in his seat, eyes wide.

"Keep watching," Mitch said.

The road changed, and as soon as there was forest, a sign announced they were in the Grand Canyon National Park, and Mitch slowed at a station to pay a vehicle fee. Then they began to climb up a hill. The forest deepened, and Sam sat back, amazed.

The trees were tall, and beautiful, and so close to the road. He couldn't see the canyon anymore, but the trees were enough—they were the only thing to see, but unlike in the desert, here Sam felt comforted, and safe. He gasped in delight, too, when Mitch slowed Old Blue and pointed to a huge elk walking away from them on the side of the road. Sam fumbled with his phone and tried to take a picture, but all he got was a close up of the animal's ass.

The traffic was getting thick now, and soon they were sometimes pulling off to lookout points. Mitch stayed on the road, though, until they were a ways in, at which point he pulled Old Blue into a parking lot and killed the engine.

Sam looked out, and stared.

He felt Mitch's hand brush his. "Come on."

It was beautiful. It was huge, it was—it was beautiful. There wasn't any other word. The rocks opened before him in layers of more colors than he could count or name, like a whole world, and when Mitch pointed out a small structure in the basin beside the river, Sam realized just *how* far down those things were, and how big the canyon was, and he was amazed all over again.

"Come down to the rail," Mitch said, "and get a better look."

Sam went, but he grew cautious as he made his way down the rocky stairs to the railing, and once there, he didn't go up to it but hung back a little, holding his arms around himself as he took in the sight below.

Mitch came up beside him, and for a long time they just stood there, looking.

"I'm so sorry, Sunshine," Mitch said. Sam tried to shake his head to dismiss it, because he didn't want to talk about it, not here, not now, maybe not ever, but Mitch put his hand on his shoulder. "No. I fucked things up pretty good, and I'm sorry."

"I don't *want* you feeling sorry for me," Sam said, and tried to pull away.

Mitch held him fast. "I'm sorry for *me.*" He caught Sam's chin and lifted it, but Sam kept his eyes down.

"Just take me to Phoenix," he said, trying to be gruff, but it came out in a whisper. "I'll get a flight home from there."

"*Sam.*"

"Or Flagstaff," he amended, hurriedly. He tried to pull his chin away. "I'll get a bus or something."

Mitch grabbed Sam's face with his whole hand and tipped it up hard, and Sam lost the battle and looked. Mitch was angry. "I'm not leaving you anywhere. Not like this." Sam flinched, and Mitch

softened, looking miserable, but he still held onto Sam. "Goddamn it, Sunshine. I fucked up. Don't do this."

You made me feel so awful, Sam thought, but couldn't say. He felt ridiculous—here he was at the *Grand Canyon*, and he wasn't even looking at it. He couldn't though, not with Mitch making him crazy, and he pressed his hands onto his chest, to push him away. But when he did, his feet slipped on the rock, and he cried out, and then he cried out a second time as his attempt to steady himself made him slip even more. He stopped pushing at Mitch and started pulling at him, and then Mitch's arms were around him, steadying him, drawing him close. Sam lifted his head, dizzy and lost, looked at Mitch's face, saw it coming closer, and shut his eyes as he opened his mouth to meet Mitch's kiss.

It was hard, full of the anger and hurt between them, and Sam pushed back as hard as Mitch did until he felt the metal of the rail behind him, and then he stopped, yielding, too conscious of the edge to fight. The kiss gentled, and Sam's hands flexed against Mitch's shirt.

Mitch broke the kiss but kept his lips close to Sam's, nuzzling him as he spoke. "Do you want me to take you to Phoenix? Do you want to go home? Or do you want to come with me to Vegas?" His hands clutched at Sam's waist. "Whatever you want, Sam. I'll do whichever you want."

Sam kept his eyes closed and held tight to Mitch, but he felt as if he were suspended out over the canyon behind him. "Do you want me along?" he whispered.

He felt a panicked thrill as Mitch's hands grew very, very tight against him. "Yes," he said at last, but added, "And no. But not because I don't want you."

"Because of what you think I'm going to see about you," Sam finished for him, and Mitch nodded.

"Why I'm such a bastard," he said, "is because I *like* the way you look at me. I don't want—" He broke off.

Sam nuzzled his cheek and kissed the corner of his mouth. "I want to go with you," he whispered, and held on, in case the canyon sucked him down.

But it didn't, and Mitch brushed a kiss against his mouth in turn and nodded. "All right," he said.

He turned Sam around in his arms, and they stood there at the rail, Mitch's arms around Sam for a long time, just looking. Occasionally Sam caught other viewers looking at them, some in distaste, but he ignored them and tried to hold on to this fragile peace between himself and Mitch. But all too soon Mitch squeezed his hip and said, "We should keep going."

Sam went back with him to the truck, but he went straight to the cupboard, and he made Mitch wait as he went back to the rail. He stood there, this time alone, watching with strange feelings rolling around inside him as he let go another handful of his mother's ashes, watching them drift on the wind down into the canyon below.

SAM felt a little better as they headed through the rest of the park, which took quite some time to navigate, especially as they hit heavy traffic around the main viewing area and Old Blue caused even more congestion. But soon they were leaving the park and the forest behind. The ragged desert never really returned, and after awhile, they came to a town that didn't look quite so desolate as the ones they'd passed in the morning.

"Williams, Arizona," Mitch said. "We're going to backtrack now to Flagstaff and then come on back through to head to Vegas. Should be well under our deadline for arrival."

Flagstaff was nicer than Sam had suspected it would be, and after the desolation of the morning, it was almost odd to see thick nests of houses and interstate. He tucked his feet onto the seat and watched it go by, feeling calmer than before, but still quiet. When Mitch stopped at the warehouse, he made no move this time to help, just sat where he was, thinking. He found his thoughts drifting back and forth between the desert and the canyon, sometimes teasing him with the memory of Mitch's embrace. But Vegas loomed like the gates of hell in his mind, and when Mitch came back in, when they looked at each other, Sam knew it was the same for him too.

The awkwardness was back again. Sam was so tired of it that this time he didn't even try to relieve it.

"You want to stop somewhere to eat?" Mitch asked, and Sam thought about sitting across from him at a restaurant feeling even more awkward, and he shook his head.

"We have all this food in here," he pointed out.

"Well, yeah, but I thought—" Mitch cut himself off with a nod. "If you'd pass me my jerky, I'll eat while we go."

"I can make you a sandwich," Sam said, more testily than he meant, and then he let his shoulders fall as Mitch nodded even more curtly than he had before.

They ate and drove in silence.

It was night by the time they turned off of the interstate onto Highway 93, and the landscape began to change again, no longer the comforting forests of Flagstaff or Williams; it was not back to desolation as bad as what they'd seen in the Navajo Nation. The road was two-lane again, and narrow, and though the road wasn't that high above the desert, it was bordered along the edge by metal rails whenever the edge dropped off too steeply for a vehicle to make it unscathed, which was a great deal of the time. Sam settled in as best he could, wondering how long it would be until he saw the city lights, wondering, too, if he still wanted to see them.

A soft rain began to fall, and Sam watched the windshield wipers slide back and forth until his eyes began to fall shut and the long day lured him into sleep.

And then suddenly there was a sharp, loud bang, the truck lurched, and shook, and Sam held white-knuckled to his seat as Mitch swore and pulled it over to the side.

"Hold on," he said, and then he was out the door and into the rain, leaving Sam sitting there alone, heart pounding. When he felt a loud bang reverberate through the truck he held still, but when it came again accompanied by a vicious, muffled curse from Mitch, he opened the door and climbed out.

The rain was coming down harder now, and in the distance he saw lightning flash, illuminating the canyon around them, making it look alien and foreboding. Sam squinted against the rain and stumbled along the edge of the truck, avoiding the rail that marked the abrupt edge of the road as he headed back to Mitch, who was leaning against the side of the trailer, his body rigid.

"*Two* blowouts—I checked the goddamn tires, but there must have been something in the road. Too late now. We're fucked." He slammed his hand against the trailer again and kicked the tire in front of him, which when the lightning flashed again, Sam saw was ragged and torn. Both that tire and the one behind it were totaled.

"Can't we change them?" Sam asked.

"Not unless you can hoist up eighty tons," Mitch replied, and kicked the tire again. "*Sonofabitch*. I'll have to call service, but at this hour they won't come until morning, not out here. And the load will be late. *Fuck!*" He pushed off the trailer and ran a hand through his wet hair. "I'm blocking the road too. I'll have to set out hazard signs."

"Let me help," Sam said.

"Get back in the cab," Mitch shot back, and turned away.

The confusion and hurt that had never quite died in Sam, even after the canyon, rolled back in a wave of anger. "Damn it, Mitch!" he said, and reached for him. Mitch growled and shoved back, knocking Sam backward, making him stumble in the mud and rain.

He hit the rail, cried out, and screamed as he went over.

It was just a ditch, not a canyon, but he couldn't see that, and as he fell he saw the mountain edge, the canyon, and the night sky all at once as he fell back onto the rock. He hit hard, knocking the scream and his breath out of him. He tasted blood and dirt, and his whole body hurt, and as a final kick in the pants, the rain fell sharp and hard into his eyes and mouth and ran into his nose until he choked.

When Mitch grabbed him, though, he cried out with what little air he had left in his lungs, and kicked, and pushed, and the harder Mitch fought to take hold of him, the harder Sam fought back, scraping his arms and his head against the rocks, kicking up mud, and pushing hard against Mitch's chest.

"Fuck you!" he shouted, and he tried to kick him in the shin. "*Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!*" He felt the sudden urge to cry, so he shouted again, kicking harder until Mitch pinned him with his body, holding his head down with a palm pressed hard against his forehead.

"You're going to cut your fucking head open!" Mitch shouted at him. He was looking him right in the eye, and whatever he saw in Sam's face made him swear. "Goddamn it, Sunshine," he whispered.

The lightning flashed, lit him up, and his body pressed harder against Sam.

Sam pushed back up against him, and to his surprise, Mitch shuddered.

“Fuck me,” Sam whispered.

Sam watched Mitch’s eyes darken, and he pushed up his pelvis, taking hold of Mitch’s waist and grinding against him again. “Fuck me,” he said again, pushing on Mitch’s waistband. “Fuck me right here, Mitch. *Fuck. Me.*”

He half-expected—half-wanted—Mitch to refuse him, and he was ready to be angry. So when Mitch’s mouth came down over his own, Sam opened up and gave him his anger, letting the tender feelings he’d crushed that morning roll back at him in nothing more than dark lust. He tried to be empty, tried to be hateful, but he couldn't quite manage it, and he was working as hard to keep from crying as he was to keep Mitch from seeing.

“Fuck me,” he whispered, when Mitch’s mouth trailed to his neck. He lifted his hips and helped Mitch pull down his jeans and his pants. He felt rock and mud against his ass. “Fuck me. Please. *Fuck me.*”

He held up his legs, drawing them back as Mitch pushed on them, bending down to spit on him. He groaned when Mitch worked it in with his fingers, trying to open him. Sam kept shouting, then fumbled and tried to undo Mitch’s pants, gasping in relief when he freed him. Sam rolled onto his back and tried to open himself, pulling himself apart with his hands and waiting. But when Mitch pushed into him it was too tight, too dry, and he cried out again, this time in pain. Even so, when Mitch pulled back, he tried to keep him there.

“Get in the truck,” Mitch growled, and when Sam shook his head, Mitch stood, scooped Sam up, and hauled him over his shoulder.

Sam’s pants were still down, so when Mitch slapped him on his ass, it was bare, and the blow was loud, cracking like the thunder still booming out around them. It stilled Sam for a second, mostly out of shock, but he soon began fighting again, all the way until the door of the truck. When Mitch tossed Sam inside, he pressed him hard against the seat, and when Sam started to wriggle away, he pushed hard against

his back with one hand, and then, with the other, spanked the ever-living shit out of Sam's bare and wriggling ass.

These slaps were loud and sharp and angry, and instead of arousing Sam they made him swear, and shout, and then, silently, cry. But they kept coming, and coming, mixing with the rain that came in through the open door, the mud from the ground, and the rocks embedded in his skin. And at some point they all rolled together into something new, something hard and sharp and erotic, and Sam was shaking, and crying, and begging, incoherently.

When the blows stopped and Mitch pulled his legs apart, he sobbed, but when Mitch hesitated, he only shook his head and opened himself farther, and when Mitch began to lick him, he sighed, and sank into the seat in surrender. He pushed back, humping, moaning, begging, until as suddenly as it had all began, it ended.

"Go inside," Mitch said gruffly, but more gently, before licking him once more and slapping him again on his backside. "Go."

Sam went, shaking, his ass burning, his arms and head aching, his whole body bruised and muddy and slightly bloody, but his cock was throbbing through it all, making him feel strange and a little sick. He peeled out of his clothes, washed his hands, and sat down on the floor, naked, and didn't move again.

When Mitch came back in the truck, he made a phone call. And for the first time since Sam had started riding with him, Mitch turned on his CB.

"This is Blue, sitting on 95 heading north into Sin City. Anybody got their ears on?"

There was a silence, then static, and then a faint voice said, "Roger, Blue. This is Razor Baiter. What's your pleasure?"

"Nothing," Mitch replied. "I let go a pair of alligators here, and I'm downed. No granny lane, and no shoulder, either, so keep your eyes peeled."

"Ten-four, Blue," Razor Baiter said. "You need a 10-34?"

"I'm called in, thanks."

"Blue?" This was a new voice on the CB, and Sam saw Mitch stiffen at the sound of it. "Well, it has been awhile, Old Man. Here I thought you were dead. You headed for the dice, are you?"

"I'm dropping off, then bundling out for LA, Skeet," Mitch replied, tightly.

"Well I will look for you, Blue," Skeet said, his voice a little silky.

"I see you up ahead, Blue," Razor Baiter said. "Can I leave anything for you? Bottle of Jack? Couple of girly mags to keep you company?"

Skeet laughed. "You're a green apple, aren't you, Razor, if you're offering that to Blue. It's a good buddy he's after, but knowing him, he's already got himself a buffalo. Ain't that right, Blue?"

"Just spread the word about the bubble trouble, boys." Mitch replied. "This is Blue, over and out."

Mitch snapped off the radio without listening for a reply. Then he locked the doors, killed the engine, and climbed back toward Sam.

He lifted him up and nudged him into the shower, and he stayed there while he turned on the spray, aiming it at Sam. Sam let Mitch lather him, rinsing away the mud, dirt, blood, and rocks, and then he let Mitch lead him over to the bed. He lay there, silent, while Mitch took a shower of his own, and he didn't move, not even when Mitch came and sat beside him naked on the bed. But when he felt Mitch's hand on his bare backside, resting gently this time, his heart kicked a beat, and when Mitch spoke, he listened.

"I've picked up boys like you before," Mitch said.

Sam opened his eyes and stared at the wall, listening.

"I've picked them up at truck stops, and by the side of the road. I've taken them to the next town or across the country. I used to do it a lot, so much that when other truckers saw me, they'd call out on the CB, asking if Old Blue had somebody along to blow his horn. Because I'd pick them up, and I always fucked them." He stroked Sam once, then pulled his hand away. "And I did it with Randy."

Sam held still, not sure he wanted to hear this.

"What you said to me that first night in North Platte," Mitch said, still speaking quietly, "was pretty much what I always did. I played games with them. I liked to play. And they got kinkier, and kinkier as the years went on. And eventually Randy got into the act, too, the two of us riding together and picking guys up, and the games got more and

more wild, and more intense, and then, finally, somebody got really hurt."

"Hurt?" Sam echoed.

Mitch blanched. "Not—Jesus, not like that. Not *hurt.* Just feelings." He grimaced. "But it was ugly, and it tore me up. I swore we were done, and we were. I never picked up anybody again, not like that, not for two years." His hand on Sam's hip stroked sadly. "Until I picked up you."

He pulled away, turned, and faced the front of the cab, bending forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

"I'm not a real nice guy, Sam. Not usually. I'm gruff, and I'm rough, and I don't have many friends. I get in more fights than conversations. The only time I'm charming is when I want a job or want to fuck somebody, and even then I think it's probably a dubious claim. It's why I do cross-country drives, and why I don't turn on the CB anymore except for what I just did." He sank forward deeper onto his knees. "When I take you into Vegas, if I take you around for more than a drive through town, we're going to run into people I know, who know what I'm really like. When they see you, they'll think you're one of those boys. My 'special deliveries', they called them. Some people will treat you bad because of that. But you aren't that, Sunshine. You *aren't*."

He was clutching at the edge of the bed as he said the last. Sam turned over onto his back and looked at him, blue-shrouded and miserable in the dark.

"What am I, then?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," Mitch whispered. "But not that." He ran a hand through his hair. "You scare the shit out of me, Sunshine, and the way you keep looking at me cuts me up. I know it's my fault, and I keep trying to fix it, but I broke it, didn't I. So you might as well know the truth. What I did to you, what I almost did there in the rain, when I hit you, knocked you down, over the *edge*—" He broke off.

"You didn't hit me on purpose."

"I about died," Mitch whispered. Now *he* was shaking. "And then there I was, fucking you raw, like some—*shit.*"

Sam pushed up onto his elbow, then winced, because it hurt. He lay back down and reached out for Mitch, touching his side. "Mitch, I told you to do that. I begged you for it."

"You're not like that," Mitch whispered hotly. "You aren't like them, but I keep making you that way."

And as Sam lay there, watching Mitch shake, he felt the world spin around. "Mitch," Sam said quietly, "I wanted you to fuck me. It hurt, but I didn't want you to stop. I wanted it. I've wanted everything you've done to me."

"You're not like them," Mitch insisted, almost angry. "You're not like *him.*"

"Will he be there?" Sam asked. "Randy?"

Mitch looked miserable. "That was him, just now, on the radio."

Sam glanced at the front of the cab, as if an echo of the man might still be there. He felt foolish now, wanting to see this rival for himself. It had been a mistake to come, he knew that now. He wished they could turn around, that they could leave. He knew that if the tires weren't blown, Mitch would. This was his fault, for insisting.

But he knew, too, that if they didn't face this, nothing would ever be okay.

What's there to be okay? a dark voice inside him whispered. *What sort of future outside of more fucking do you think the two of you have?*

Sam shifted uncomfortably on the bed.

Mitch sank forward so far his head was almost between his knees. "I'm too old for this," he murmured.

Sam smiled, sadly, and reached for him, tugging at his bare arm. He realized Mitch was wearing only a towel, and that he himself was wearing nothing at all. "Lie with me," he whispered. He tugged again. "Come lie with me, Mitch."

Mitch came, reluctant, and Sam wrapped the sheet around them, pushing away the towel so that they were pressed skin to skin. He kissed Mitch's chest, his neck, and his mouth, coaxing him open, stealing inside as his hands roved over the other man's body, shaping it, feeling it. He explored his arms, his sides, his pecs, and his belly, exploring that flesh before moving on to his hips, and finally, his cock. Mitch stroked him back, and kissed him, but though the heat built up between them, it never crested, just kept in a slow, steady burn, until

they both grew weary and simply pressed their foreheads together, their hands slowing to gentle skims, until they stopped entirely.

They lay silent in the dark, waiting for morning, listening to the thunder and the rain as the storm played out across the desert.

MITCH'S transformation began with the arrival of the service truck.

Once again Mitch was gone when Sam woke, except today he came into consciousness to the sudden shaking and banging that turned out to be the huge portable jack hefting up the back end of the trailer before Mitch and the tow truck driver wrestled two new tires into place. Sam hurried into pants and took his shoes and T-shirt with him on the way out the door, eager to be out of the shaking, unsteady vehicle. This turned out to be his first mistake.

The tow truck operator saw Sam first. Sam was so barely dressed his pants weren't even buttoned, and he gave the tow truck driver an awkward wave as he hopped on the rocks to put on his shoes. The man gave Sam a disgusted look and returned to tightening lug nuts on the first tire. When Mitch came back around, he saw Sam, and he flinched before turning to put the second tire in place.

Sam tugged his T-shirt over his head and tried not to notice. When the jack shifted and the trailer shook, though, he hopped over the rail he'd fallen over the night before, trying to put some distance between himself and the shuddering vehicle. But he didn't get twenty feet away before Mitch saw him and shook his head.

"Careful, Sam," he called out. "There's scorpions and snakes out there."

Sam yelped, jumped up, and made his way back toward the trailer.

"See you had some takeout from Pickle Park," the tow truck driver said snidely as Sam went by.

Sam saw Mitch's grip on his wrench fumble as he aimed it at the next nut. "Sam's a friend," he said in a tone that suggested the conversation should end now.

"Yeah, I bet he's a real good buddy," the man replied. For some reason, this made Mitch even angrier, and for a horrible moment, Sam

thought Mitch was going to use the wrench on him. But he said and did nothing, and Sam hurried around to the front of the truck, where he remained out of sight, trying not to think about how badly he had to piss. When they lowered the trailer again, Mitch came back up front to the cab.

"Get in," he said, and Sam did, quickly. He headed straight for the bathroom, and while he was using it, the engine started, and Mitch took them off toward Vegas. Sam washed up, came out, dithered a moment, then and unplugged his phone from its charger and began to surf. It took him a few minutes, but he found a Wikipedia entry for CB slang soon enough. He looked up buffalo and Pickle Park, and, more by accident than anything, good buddy, which apparently didn't mean what it used to mean from the '80s trucker movies.

Ah, he thought. Then he plugged the phone back in, grabbed a mineral water from the fridge and headed back to the front of the cab. He sat down, drank a little, then decided this would be better faced head-on.

"You know," he said as carefully as he could, "it's not like it's a lie."

Mitch glanced at him, still looking ruffled. "What's not?"

"What they said about me on the radio, and what that guy said. You didn't pick me up at a rest stop, but surely a truck stop is close. And while I'm not exactly a prostitute—"

"It's not the same," Mitch said sharply.

"Well, it's splitting hairs, from where I sit," Sam said. "Mitch, I don't care."

"*I* care," Mitch shot back. "It's not what you are!"

This was last night's argument again, and it was dangerous territory. *Am I your boyfriend, then?* He couldn't ask that, even though he wanted to, because it felt ridiculous, especially after yesterday.

Sam sighed, propped his feet on the dash, and retreated into his bottle of water. He watched the desert go by, watching small mountains cropping up around the edges of the road. But his mind wouldn't let go of the argument, and eventually he gave into it again.

"This is why you kept me in the cab all the time, when you loaded and unloaded," Sam said. "You didn't want anyone to see me. That's why."

"Yes," Mitch replied.

Sam's hand tightened on his bottle. He bit the inside of his cheek as they began to weave through increasingly large hills, and then he swore. "Fuck—Mitch, I'd rather be known as your piece on the side than your great big secret."

"You're not—" Mitch began, but he cut himself off and reached for his cigarettes.

"I'm not a secret? Just like I'm not your buffalo or your good buddy or your pickle thing, whatever they called it? What the fuck *am* I?"

"You're Sam," Mitch replied, and he lit his cigarette.

"This is so fucked, Mitch." Sam turned in his seat and threw up his hands. "What the fuck *do* you want me to be?" Sam waved his hand at the city beginning to open up before them, just the start of the suburbs. "Why did you bring me here? Do I have to hide the whole time in Las Vegas too?"

"I don't know." Mitch put out his cigarette and lit another one.

Sam swore, unbuckled his belt, and headed back through the curtain, ignoring his first entrance to Las Vegas entirely. He got into the shower as Mitch pulled off the road and toward the warehouse. Sam took his time, doing his hair and primping, swearing at his lack of clothing. He needed a washer and a dryer. Climbing into his mud-caked jeans, he stuck his head out the driver's side window and looked around hoping to see a Walmart or somewhere he could buy something else to wear.

"I thought so," drawled a slightly familiar voice from below. Sam looked down, surprised, and found a dark-haired, wiry, slightly greasy man wearing a black T-shirt, black jeans, and black motorcycle boots looking up at him. He was leering. "I heard the rumor Mitch had cleaned up his nose, but it's good to see that some things never change. What's your name, honey?"

Sam felt somehow he should be embarrassed, but this guy was so outrageous he couldn't manage it. "My name's Sam," he said, and even before the man spoke, Sam knew what he was going to say.

"Good to meet you, Sam." The man grinned a wicked grin. "My name is Randy."

Chapter 9

THE little bastard, standing in front of me, after all this time. Randy. This is Mitch's Randy. The man that keeps fucking up my life.

Sam tried not to let his nervousness show. "Hello," he said.

The man laughed, a deep belly laugh that made Sam tingle. "You're a pretty one, Sam. You and Mitch heading to The Watering Hole after?"

"I have no idea," Sam said. He glanced down at himself and suppressed a shudder at the sight of his pants. "I hope to hell we're heading to a laundromat, or a mall."

"I can take you shopping, baby," the man said. "You climb on down here, and we'll take a little ride."

This wasn't so bad, actually. Randy was more funny than scary, so far. He was over the top, but he wasn't scary.

"I don't even know you," Sam pointed out. "Except that you're that guy from the CB last night, the one that made Mitch mad."

"Oh, I usually do," Randy agreed. "But yeah, that was me. Why don't you come down, and we'll see if I still have my touch?"

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Sam said calmly. He was almost enjoying this. "I'm waiting for Mitch."

"Come on," Randy teased. "He ain't *that* good."

Sam lifted his eyebrows. "You know this from experience?"

Randy's eyes danced. "Yep."

It was a blow, but he'd walked into it. Of course they had experience. This was the guy Mitch was still hung up over. Sam tried to

cover his sensitivity with a shrug and a boast. "Well, *I* think he's that good. So the answer is still no."

Randy looked very amused. "Aw, baby, you're a *pet*. Well, why didn't you say?"

Pet? Sam frowned at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"He give you a name? A nickname?" Randy asked.

Sam could feel the trap rising up around him, but he didn't understand it. He kept quiet.

Randy was still grinning. "No? Well, that was usually my specialty. I'll call you Peaches. How's that?"

"Sam?"

Sam turned, flushing guiltily even though he had no idea why. Mitch's face was wooden as he looked back and forth between Sam and Randy.

Sam ran his fingers through his hair as he composed himself. *Don't let this go funny. You can do this. Show him.* "Mitch—I'm out of clothes. I need a washing machine and probably something to wear in the meantime."

"I'll give you something—" Randy started to say, and Mitch turned on him, going from wooden to furious in half a second.

"Randy, you stupid fuck!" He waved an angry hand at him. "Goddamn it, why the hell are you here?"

"Looking for you, you big faggot," he said mildly. He grinned at Sam. "I like your boy. Bring your shit to the house, and we'll play while we wait for the wash." When Mitch started swearing again, Randy only grinned. "I got your bike in the garage, if you recall. Unless you plan on running Blue bobtail around town?"

Mitch rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at Sam. He looked bottled, and nervous, and a little sad. Sam didn't know if he wanted to kiss him or hit him. But there was something else there, too, in Mitch's expression, and as soon as Sam saw it, he wished he hadn't.

Longing. Sam saw longing.

Sam turned back to Mitch, too tired to keep this up. "Mitch, I don't care where we go," he lied. "I just need to have clean clothes, like, yesterday."

"Get the dirty stuff, then," he said gruffly, "and toss it out in a garbage bag. And bring anything you want to have around with you for the next few days."

"We're staying that long?" Sam asked, surprised. And a little afraid.

"I have no fucking idea." Mitch stalked off.

Sam rolled his eyes, then ducked back inside and started to pack.

He had most of the dirty clothes in a garbage bag and was trying to decide if he should bring anything for Mitch or anything to eat when the door opened. He held up a pair of jeans and glanced over his shoulder. "Mitch, do you want—oh," he said when he saw Randy standing there.

"Just came to help you, Peaches," he said, lewd grin back in place.

Sam sighed and tried to look busy. "I think you came to piss him off again." *And scare me.*

"Oh, that's just an added benefit." Randy leaned against the bathroom door and ran his eyes up and down Sam's body. "Baby, you are sex on legs."

"And you're really gross," Sam shot back, tossing his iPhone charger into his pack.

Randy laughed. "You got sass. I like that. Mitch's boys usually don't have sass."

"I'm not his boy," Sam said, a little tightly, and tossed a pair of Mitch's underwear and socks in with the charger. *According to him, anyway.* "And I'm not a *pet*, either, whatever the fuck that is."

"Seriously?" Randy stood a little straighter. "You two aren't fucking?"

"Seriously, you can just go wait outside." Sam debated on the bag of jerky, then tossed it in too.

"Naw," Randy said, easing again. "He's too pissy about you, and you're the little lady in here packing up his shit for him. You're a pet."

"Hey," Sam said, turning on him with a fierce smile. "You know, I think I will just wear these jeans. I don't need laundry after all, so why don't you get the fuck out."

Randy held up his hands and whistled low. "Baby, put the gun down! Jesus, maybe the two of you aren't fucking, if you're both this uptight."

Sam bent down to the fridge, poking for more mineral water. He grabbed a yogurt, too, and a spoon. He packed the water, but he grabbed a spoon and ate the other.

"We keep fighting," he said after the first bite, regretting his confession instantly, but unable to stop talking now that he had begun. "Since Durango."

"Shit—you been with him that long?" Randy asked.

"Since Iowa." Sam ate more yogurt and shook his head. "Fuck. Forget I said anything. You're only going to be an ass, I can tell."

But Randy was shaking his head, looking stunned. "I'll be damned. You *aren't* a buffalo, are you?"

Sam was really starting to hate that word. He tossed the yogurt in the trash and his spoon in the sink. "Go away, please."

"Seriously," Randy said, his tone earnest now. "Are you two—together?"

"I have no idea." Sam zipped the bag shut and did once last glance around the cab. Had he packed the right stuff for Mitch? Should he have even bothered? He glanced at the bathroom, thinking about his shampoo, but Randy was still blocking it. He shouldered the pack. "Fine. If you won't leave, I will."

But as he tried to walk past, Randy grabbed him by the arm. Sam stiffened and fought him. But Randy's hand closed over his crotch, and Sam froze, half in terror, half in a sort of shocked arousal.

"Peaches," Randy whispered. He nuzzled Sam's neck with the scruff of a beard, and Sam shivered and felt himself go hard.

He's like you. Suddenly, Sam thought he might understand.

Randy felt the shift, too, and groped him boldly. "Peaches, I'll give you five hundred dollars if you let me take you off right now and fuck you."

The eroticism of being held captive and fondled by a stranger was washed away by those words, which hit Sam like a bucket of cold water. He wrenched himself away, and Randy laughed. But just as he

was screwing himself up for an angry retort, Randy held up his hands again, and something in his smile caught Sam and made him listen.

"You aren't a hooker, Peaches. But you are somethin' sweet. And now I get why the pair of you are so funny." He ran a finger down Sam's cheek, and Sam flinched, but it was a little late, and Randy chuckled. "Oh, baby, this is gonna be an interesting couple of days, I can tell that now."

Sam pulled away again, and when Mitch came into the cab, Sam was torn between relief and panic. He hurried forward, almost running into him in his efforts to get away from Randy.

"I packed for you," he said hurriedly. "But I don't know if I got the right stuff."

Randy laughed, and Mitch glowered at him. "Whatever you brought is fine," Mitch said. "Let's go."

Randy pinched Sam's ass as he came behind him out of the cab, and he grabbed it again when Sam jumped. "Real interesting," he whispered in his ear, then slapped his rump and stepped out into the parking lot.

RANDY took them, windows down in his beat up pickup, on a tour through Vegas. But he didn't flirt with Mitch, which was what Sam had feared. No: Randy flirted with Sam.

He'd started as soon as they were alone. Once they'd left Old Blue, Sam had almost immediately gone back for his mother's ashes, fussing for a minute as he tried to figure out what to carry them in because he didn't want to bring them all, and just when he was about to give up, Mitch opened the door and told him he thought there was an empty little container in the bottom drawer, in the back. Sam had scooped some in, then come out and quietly thanked Mitch, but Mitch only nodded curtly and moved Old Blue to wherever it was he would store her for the next few days. That meant it was just he and Randy. And that was when it began.

"Come on, Peaches," Randy said, putting his arm around Sam's waist and leading him in the opposite direction. "Let's run away quick before he comes back."

Sam detached himself and quickly put enough distance between them so it couldn't happen again with any kind of ease. "Are you going to be like this the whole time?"

Randy just grinned. "You make it too easy and too fun." But he made no more moves to grab Sam, just spun his keys on his finger and smiled to himself as he nodded toward a very, very old, very beat up pickup that made the one in Denver look like it had come from the showroom floor.

"Do all truckers only drive pickups when they aren't in a rig?" Sam asked. Then he realized his assumption. "Wait—you *are* a trucker, too, right?"

"Yep, though I do other things too." Randy nodded at the truck. "Not all I do, no, but after riding up that high all the time, it's hard to go crawling around on your belly." He opened the door with his key, slid across, and unlocked the other for Sam.

It was a bench seat, but Sam quickly realized that as soon as Mitch was inside, they'd be crammed in close, and he could only imagine what this guy was going to do. He lingered in the doorway, scanning around, wincing at the sun. "Hotter here, than in Colorado. A lot."

"You been in the mountains, so yeah, this is gonna feel pretty warm. Nights still get cool, though."

"Not in Iowa," Sam said. "It stays muggy and hot all night."

"Well, with you there, I'm sure it does." Randy patted the seat beside him, leering. "Get on in here, baby, and let me get to know you better."

Sam didn't move. "Are you always like this? Seriously?"

Randy laughed but said nothing, just patted the seat again. Sam stood there until Mitch came up, and now he had no choice but to get in. When he slid across the seat, Randy grabbed his thigh, squeezed it fast and hard, then leaned over, speaking in Sam's ear, his lips brushing the flesh of his lobe.

"Peaches, I get much, much better than this."

And as they drove through town, Randy pointing out this or that landmark, feature, or interesting historical or cultural tidbit, Sam leaned against Mitch, Mitch's arm draped across his back, and Randy teased Sam, and through him, Mitch. Every time he reached down to shift,

Randy's hand deliberately caressed Sam's knee, and Sam frequently had to push it off his thigh. Mitch saw it all, and every time he did, his hand tightened on Sam's shoulder. It was so over the top that Sam thought it had to be an act, that Randy was deliberately being the biggest asshole he could possibly be, but Sam couldn't quite figure out why. And he had no idea why Mitch was so quiet about it. He'd made noise for a few minutes, at first in anger but later in a sort of subtle pleading, and now he was just wooden, as if he were waiting for the inevitable, horrible end.

Finally, Sam decided he'd had enough.

"Interesting as this is," he said after Randy had taken them by their seventeenth wedding chapel, "I'm not kidding about needing to do laundry."

"Oh, we're going shopping, Peaches," Randy said, his hand drifting briefly to Sam's thigh, departing again before Sam could remove him. "Almost there too."

"My name is Sam," he said, and he moved his legs closer to Mitch.

Randy laughed and said nothing more as they drove down the street. Mitch said nothing either, but he lit a cigarette.

Randy took them down a series of increasingly suspicious streets. Sam saw a lot of porn shops and seedy looking bars, and more than a few disreputable people eyeballing them as they drove down the street. Sam edged even closer to Mitch, who at first didn't notice, but when a car backfired ahead of them in traffic, and Sam stiffened in surprise, Mitch's arm tucked a little closer around his shoulders and he bent down to brush his lips against his temple.

"It's okay, Sunshine," he said, calming him. "I got you."

Sam nodded, but when Randy pulled into the parking lot of a dirty looking place that said DISCOUNT CLOTHING, Sam stuck close to Mitch as they got out of the car and headed into the store.

He'd thought the place was a sort of thrift store like Goodwill, but once inside Sam saw it was more of a clothing warehouse. Everything was new, and some of it very stylish, but it was disorderly arranged on the racks, shoved into place and in no particular arrangement either of style or size. Sam tried to find jeans, or any kind of pants, really, but after five minutes the only thing in his size he'd come up with was a

pair of very nice dress pants. He liked them, actually, but even at home he'd have nowhere to wear them. He searched on, wishing Randy would have just taken them to a Walmart so he'd already be changed.

Randy appeared over the top of a rack of clothing and passed him a pair of folded jeans. "Here, Peaches. Try these."

Sam peeked at the size, which was exactly right, and nodded. "Yeah, these are—" He opened them up, letting the legs fall down to the ground, and he turned back to Randy, glaring. "How about a pair *not* covered in holes?"

"You said yourself it was warm," Randy pointed out. "Built-in air conditioning."

"Free advertising too," Sam said, poking his fingers through the gashes underneath the seat.

"How about this," Randy said. "You try them on, and you show Mitch. If he likes them, you get them."

"I'm not buying something this impractical," Sam said, pushing them back at Randy.

"You really are from Iowa, aren't you? Here, then—you try them, and if Mitch likes them, *I'll* buy them." Randy passed the jeans over again.

"You're not buying anything for me," Sam said, but he kept the jeans, glaring down at them. "I'd look like a hooker."

"Yeah, I thought you'd like that part." Randy passed another pair over. "Here. A more sensible pair for your Iowa side."

These, Sam noted, had no holes, but they did have chains at the pockets, and were splattered decoratively with paint along the cuffs, seams, and on the butt. After peeking at the price tag, he decided if they fit okay, he'd keep them.

The dressing rooms were on the far side of the store and were little more than sagging curtains over a wall made out of shakily piled boxes. Randy ushered Sam into one and handed him the jeans one at a time. He also stayed at the gap, looking in, clearly intending to watch Sam get undressed.

"Where's Mitch?" Sam asked, hesitating over the button of his jeans.

“Outside having another cigarette.” He made hurry-up motions with his hand. “Come on. Let’s see what you’re packing, Peaches.”

It was something about Randy’s voice, Sam decided, as, instead of demanding Randy get the hell out of his dressing room, Sam simply undid his jeans and pushed them down over his hips, averting his eyes so he couldn’t see Randy watching. When Randy murmured appreciatively, Sam felt his ears burn, but he just kept getting dressed, looking at the floor, boxes of stock making up the walls—anything but Randy’s face. *Mitch wouldn’t leave you with him if he wasn’t safe,* he tried to tell himself. Except he was pretty sure nothing about Randy was safe.

Neither, he thought, sucking in a breath as he pulled the waistband into place, were these jeans.

Randy wolf whistled from his viewpoint at the gap. “That’s the stuff, baby.”

Sam ran his hand self-consciously over the leg and then the ass. “I can’t get them—you can see my underwear!”

“You are the funniest combination, Peaches, of prude and slut. The answer, of course, is to wear different underwear, or none at all.” He pulled open the curtain and motioned to Sam. “Come on, let’s go show your honey.”

Sam came out, reluctantly, wrapping his arms over his belly as he followed Randy across the store. He felt the breeze blow across his legs at every step, and he was suddenly conscious of every other patron in the store. Most didn’t look at him, but the few who did made him feel even more naked. None of them ogled him, and in fact a few gave him a look of disgust. He wanted to run back to the dressing room, but when he balked, Randy grabbed his hand and dragged him the rest of the way, up to the front window where Mitch was standing, staring out at the street while he smoked. Randy rapped on the window. Mitch turned. Randy spun Sam slowly, his hand lingering on his hip, tugging at one of the slashes beneath his ass. When Sam faced Mitch again, he searched his face. It was closed off, but his eyes gave him away. He was turned on. He nodded curtly and took another drag, but he kept his eyes on Sam’s bottom half.

“Still think they’re impractical?” Randy said, his voice silky.

Sam turned around and headed back for the dressing room. “I need to try on the other pair.”

This time Randy didn’t come along and watch, to Sam’s relief. The jeans fit very well, actually, and Sam hated to take them off and put on his dirty ones, but he did, and carried the lot to the register. He gripped the ripped pair tightly, fighting a silent war with himself, but in the end he decided to get them, too, and he handed the clerk his credit card.

It was refused.

Sam flushed a deep, terrible red, a blush made worse when the clerk started to refuse to give back his card. “But—that’s *mine!* Why—?”

Randy peered over his shoulder. “Did you call and tell your bank you were traveling, Peaches? Sometimes they put a hold on them if you don’t.”

Sam had not. “Look, just give me my card,” he said to the clerk, fumbling for his license. “See? It’s me.” He let out an audible sigh of relief when she handed it back, but he balked when Randy handed her his card.

“*No*,” he said, pushing him back. “No, I’m not getting them.”

“Baby,” Randy said, laughing, and tried again.

Sam shoved him back, harder this time. “You aren’t buying them, and if you do, I’m not wearing them.” He let out an angry breath. “And I’m not your baby.”

“What’s going on?” Mitch asked, coming up behind him.

Sam blushed all over again. “I had trouble with my card. It’s got credit, but I guess I should have called and said I was traveling. It’s no big deal—let’s just go, so I can wash things.”

Mitch pulled out his wallet.

“I already tried that,” Randy drawled, before Sam could protest. But Mitch just looked down at Sam, held his gaze, and handed the clerk his card.

“Mitch,” Sam protested, but weakly. He didn’t want him to do this, but he wasn’t going to refuse him the same way he had Randy.

“Just let me do this, Sunshine,” Mitch said quietly. He waved the card in front of the clerk, who watched Sam a little longer before taking it, carefully, and running through the charge.

Mitch collected the bag, too, and carried it all the way to the truck.

“So,” Randy said as they crossed the parking lot. “Sunshine, is it?”

He said it casually, but from the way Mitch stiffened, Sam knew it had significance. Randy caught the look and grinned wickedly.

“I told you, we always name the pets,” Randy said.

“*You* did,” Mitch shot back angrily. And guiltily. Sam thought, feeling wounded, that it was deserved.

“You agreed to them,” Randy said, unconcerned. He looked Sam up and down and shook his head. “Nope, you really are Peaches, not Sunshine.”

“It’s not like that,” Mitch growled. But he didn’t look at Sam as he said it. And suddenly the nickname that had made Sam feel so cherished and tender didn’t, anymore.

Randy looked pleased with himself. “How about a quick stop at the Watering Hole?”

“I still need to change my clothes,” Sam said, trying not to think about being a pet. But it was impossible. *Was that all I was to him? Is that all I am to him, even now? Why does he look so guilty?*

“I’ve been burning the candle at both ends,” Mitch said. “I need to crash for the afternoon.”

“Even better,” Randy said, slinging an arm around Sam’s shoulder.

Sam dislodged him, putting himself closer to Mitch as a result. Mitch surprised him by putting his arm around Sam’s waist. Sam started to stiffen, but Mitch squeezed him gently, and the gesture diffused Sam. He relented and sagged against him.

Randy watched them, frowning. “I ain’t buying it yet,” he said in a different tone than Sam had yet heard him use. Less light, more… stern.

“Nobody’s sellin’ you anything, Skeet,” Mitch said, but with a lightness that made Sam feel a little easier. He just wished he knew what the hell was going on.

“I meant to pay for those,” Sam said very quietly, so Randy wouldn’t hear, as he and Mitch waited for Randy to unlock their door.

“This isn’t your mama’s glass chest,” Mitch said. “Just a few pairs of jeans.”

Then he leaned close, so close that his lips brushed Sam’s ear as he spoke.

“I call you Sunshine,” he said, “because when you smile, it’s like the sun comes out.”

Sam shut his eyes, the words a balm he hadn’t even fully let himself acknowledge that he needed. He remembered what Mitch had told him about the alley, about him looking happy, and all his doubts washed away. He turned his head and brushed a kiss against Mitch’s lips. When he pulled away, he caught Randy looking at them. Randy looked surprised, and wary.

“Speaking of jeans,” Mitch said, no longer whispering, “I am looking forward to seeing you wear yours. Especially the ones with the holes.”

“But they show my underwear,” Sam protested, as he opened the door.

“Wear the pair I bought you,” Mitch suggested.

And cue the blush. “I didn’t bring them.”

Mitch’s grin was very wicked. “I did,” he said, and he urged Sam into the truck.

THE drive to Randy’s house didn’t take long from the neighborhood where they bought Sam’s jeans. After a quick stop at a gas station to pick up beer and some more cigarettes for Mitch, Randy took them down a series of streets until he pulled up behind a small, plain, but decent-looking house, parked in the drive, and killed the engine. There wasn’t much of a yard, and it was done up in gravel and scraggly cactus rather than grass. But inside it was cool, and while it was shabby, it was cleaner than Sam would have expected.

Mitch, who had hauled in the bag of dirty laundry, a smaller bag of his own, and Sam's jeans, deposited them in the middle of the living room and collapsed on the couch.

Randy came in after him and gave him a withering look. "Mitch Tedsoe, I was so looking forward to your mess."

Mitch, keeping his eyes closed, flipped him the bird. "I gotta crash. My room still there? Or did you finally rent it out?"

Randy snorted. "That was an idle threat to get you to come back, as well you know. Though I'll admit I've used it more and more for storage."

"So long as you didn't store anything on the bed, I'm good," Mitch murmured.

"A little, but we can shove it off easy enough." Randy picked up Mitch's bag and extended a hand to him. "Up, Old Man."

Sam watched them go, feeling very much like a third wheel as he hovered in the entryway, watching the pair of them move down the hall. He spent a moment wondering how exactly he was supposed to behave, then decided, *fuck it*, and grabbed the shopping bag and headed in search for a bathroom. He found one in the hallway and changed, skimming out of everything and putting on just his new jeans—the paint-splattered ones—and brought the dirty clothes out to sort with the others for the wash. He upended the entire garbage bag on the floor, sorted out light from dark and separated the sheets into their own pile. He put the darks back into the bag and the lights and sheets into two piles as unobtrusive as possible by the wall to the kitchen. He found the washer in the kitchen, started the first load, and when he still found himself alone, wandered down the hall to see what the hell was going on.

He stopped and listened as soon as he heard his name.

"—Sam is a good kid. Don't fuck with him," Mitch was murmuring. He sounded half asleep already.

"I'd like nothing better than to fuck with that hot little piece," Randy said. "Just like old times, Old Man."

There was a groan, and it startled Sam. It was a… pleasured sound. He dared a peek around the corner and startled anew at what he saw.

Mitch was naked down to his briefs, lying face down and sprawled on the bed, which wasn't even on a frame. It was just a mattress and box springs in the middle of the floor. Randy was straddling him, fully clothed and sitting on Mitch's ass as he massaged the other man's shoulders, but he was also rotating his own hips in a very sensual motion. As Sam watched Randy reached back, caressing Mitch's thigh and sliding his fingers toward the hem of Mitch's briefs.

Mitch bucked, and Sam ducked back into the hall, pressing his back to the wall, his heart heavy as it pounded in his chest.

"Knock that shit off," Mitch said, a little less groggily. "He's gonna see you, and I don't need you making this more complicated than it already is."

Randy snorted, and Sam heard a muffled slap of hand on flesh, which he suspected was Mitch's ass. "You old goat. You're serious, aren't you?"

"I'm not fucking kidding, Randy. Leave him alone."

There was a pause, which felt heavy to Sam, but that could have been because he was bowing under the weight of everything he was hearing, his emotions bouncing between hope to fear to betrayal to euphoria, sending him in an elliptical orbit of confusion.

"Let me take the two of you out tonight," Randy said, his voice oddly gentle. "I want to watch you interact."

"No, you want to fuck with him. And with me."

Randy's laugh was a sort of guttural purr. "Oh yes. But first I want to watch."

"We are not putting on a fucking show for you."

"See," Randy said, silky again, "I think that's where you're getting it wrong. But I'm not sure yet. I need to study this a bit more."

"Shit," Mitch murmured. "Just leave him alone until I'm awake. Try and be a nice person, just for one damn afternoon."

"I'll be *very* nice to him," Randy purred. "And to you."

There was another silence, and then another moan, and a wet sound that sounded far, far too much like kissing. Sam wanted to look, but didn't dare. He made himself leave instead, heading back down the hall as silently as possible, heart hammering all the way. He went back to the kitchen, but he didn't know what to do or how to behave. He

wanted to cry, and he wanted to shout, and he wanted to go back there and stop them or at least make sure they weren't doing what he was afraid they were doing. In the end, he just stood against the counter, dying a little as every minute passed, more and more certain that something he hadn't even fully let himself admit had been happening began to end.

"Hello."

Sam whirled around. Randy, of course, was standing in the archway between the living room and the kitchen, looking smug. Sam clenched his fists at his sides and wished like hell he could hit him.

Randy grinned. "Oh, Peaches, you're cute, that's what you are. But you can relax. He's not going to fuck me, not with you here. Not *without* you, anyhow, but I'll admit I'm probably dreaming even then." When Sam sputtered, Randy leaned on the archway and folded his hands over his arms. "I know you were standing there listening, because I saw your shadow, and I know when you left, because it moved. And you'd damn well better not plan on playing poker in town, baby, because you don't have the face for it." He leaned over to the fridge, opened it, and pulled out two beers, holding one out to Sam. "Here. Sit. Drink. I'll make you some food, and we'll talk."

Sam took the beer with some reserve. He sat at the table and just held it for a long time, watching as Randy opened the fridge again and took out hamburger, tomatoes, cheese, and a carton of eggs. After awhile Sam opened the beer, but he still didn't drink it.

Randy cracked an egg, slid the yolk into a bowl, and tossed the shell into the sink. "Ask, or you'll drive yourself crazy," he said, without turning around.

"What am I supposed to ask?" Sam shot back, angrier than he wanted to be.

"Anything," Randy suggested, idly. "The four million questions you have would be a good place to start."

Sam glowered at his back. "Like you're going to give me honest answers."

Randy shrugged. "Sometimes I will. What will be interesting to see if you're smart enough to figure out when that's happening. And for every question you ask, I get one from you too." He cracked another egg. "See? We both win."

Sam watched him stab the spatula into the ground beef for a few minutes, then gave in. “Were you kissing him, just now?”

Randy paused and turned to look at Sam. He appeared both amused and surprised. “Yes.”

Sam’s jaw tightened. “Did he kiss you back?”

Randy laughed. “Peaches, you suck at this game, you know.”

“*Did he kiss you back?*”

Randy sighed and turned back to his ground beef. “Yes, he did. And then I blew him, and he came in my face, and he told me to tell the skinny bitch in the kitchen to fuck off, because he’d have no other.”

“You’re an ass,” Sam snapped, and he shoved the beer away.

“And you’re not very smart, for a college boy,” Randy replied, mildly. He shook his head and continued to poke at the frying meat. “You weren’t listening very hard, if you heard our conversation and could still ask if he kissed me back. Either that or you think far more highly of my seduction skills than he does, in which case I will be right over to that table and bend you over it.”

Sam startled and moved reflexively toward the wall. Randy turned in time to catch the movement, and looked pleased, but in a strange way.

“Yeah, you’re a puzzle, aren’t you, little man? The question is, how to best poke at you and figure you out?”

“How did you know I was in college?” Sam asked.

“The neon sign on your forehead.” Randy said. “You have a look about you that says you’ve been poking your head under the hood. I see too many of you running around this town. If you weren’t in college, you damn sure studied something a lot.”

Sam gave in and reached for the beer. “I’m in school for nursing. But it’s taking awhile.” He took a drink. “It’s not going real well, either.”

“Not what you thought it would be, or harder than you thought it would be?”

Sam considered this. “Both.” He scraped his thumbnail against the label on his beer. “It’s taking so much time. And I’m tired of having no money and no life. Sometimes I don’t know if it’s going to change

when I'm through, either." He shook his head. "Then I just figure I'm a stupid whiner and should shut up and go study."

"It isn't stupid to make sure you're aiming yourself in the right direction. You only get one spin on the blue ball, Peaches. Make sure it goes the way you want." He salted the ground beef. "How'd you meet Mitch? Rest stop or truck stop?"

"The alley behind my aunt and uncle's pharmacy." When Randy glanced over his shoulder again, it was Sam's turn to look smug.

"No shit?" Randy said, surprised. "So you—what, just struck up a conversation?"

Sam tried to think of how to describe it. "In a way," he said carefully.

Randy laughed. "He fucked you."

Sam lifted his chin. "And this is funny?"

"It's a relief. So he fucked you—how'd you end up on the road with him? You just leave work and school and go?"

"No," Sam said, irritated. "I accidentally left my phone in his trailer, and he called me, and then he came back to return it, and we had dinner, and then—"

"Then you ran off with him?"

"No. Then he left."

Randy put down the spatula and turned fully around. "And you didn't have sex with him again?"

Sam blushed. "I thought I got to ask questions?"

Randy waved him aside. "In a minute. This is huge, here. Did you or did you not have sex with him—what, dinner in a *restaurant?*"

"Yes," Sam said, getting testy. "It was nice."

"So he calls you, tells you he wants to return your phone, and then has dinner with you." Randy said this as if it were the tallest tale he'd ever heard. "And then gave you a peck on the cheek?"

Sam sighed. "Okay, there was a thing in Old Blue after. And there was the phone sex. But everything else, yes."

"*Phone* sex?" Randy turned off the burner, grabbed a chair, and straddled it. "Start over, and this time don't skip shit."

Sam did, reluctantly, editing as much as he could, not wanting to tell any of this at all, and yet somehow not able to resist his confession. He gave Randy the bare bones of their alley encounter, the phone call, the dinner, and the after, and then he explained how everything had gone south with his aunt, and how he'd texted Mitch.

"And he said to meet him at the truck stop near me, so I did, and here I am," he finished.

Randy was watching him, eagle-eyed and dubious. "And you've been fucking your way across the west, have you?"

Sam folded his arms and glared. "How did you meet Mitch? How long have you known him?"

Randy gave him a wry look and blew him a kiss before rising and going back to his stove. "Since 1997. You know, when you were in grade school. We met at a truck stop outside of Houston." He tossed Sam a smirk. "I was his first hustle."

Sam hated, hated, hated that answer. "So you're lovers?" he asked, the question more biting than he wanted to let it be.

Randy snorted. "*Lovers*. Fuck, no. Have we fucked? Yes, and in more ways than your corn-fed mind can imagine. But we've never been and never will be *lovers*." He shook his head over the once again sizzling meat. "Jesus."

Sam felt as if the weight of the whole Rocky Mountains had been lifted off him. "Then why are you riding me so hard?"

Randy's voice switched to a purr. "Peaches, I would be more than happy to ride you hard."

Sam hated the shiver that voice and those words gave him. He retreated into his beer, peeling at the label again.

"What's the kinkiest thing you've ever done?" Randy asked.

Sam gave him a look, but Randy was still turned around. "I'm not answering that."

"Sure you are. I'll answer it too. Mine is that I blew a frat boy in the middle of a hotel hallway while another one ate an ice cream cone out of my ass." When Sam choked on his beer, he laughed. "Damnedest thing is, it was only last week. So. Your turn, Peaches."

Sam considered, more for his own curiosity than because he intended to answer Randy. “Well, it depends on your criteria,” he said at last. “Do you mean it had to feel dirty, or what?”

“Kinky. Like, you were doing it, and it felt really, really bent, but you loved it anyway.” He poked again at the meat. “I want to see what my boy’s learned over the past two years.”

Sam let his sexual history roll past him in a swift, erotic home movie. Yes, the kinky stuff was with Mitch, but the hell he was going to tell any of that to Randy. Then he remembered Darin, and that time while he couldn’t decide if he wanted to fuck or watch the game.

“You won’t be learning anything,” Sam said, “because it wasn’t with him.”

Randy turned around completely again. “Oh, do go on.”

Sam raised his eyebrows, only blushing a tiny bit. “Getting fucked from behind during the entire last quarter of a basketball game while I was kneeling on a pizza box. He used my back for a plate, humped me in time to the dribbling, and slapped my ass every time his team scored.”

“Spanked you?” Randy said, eyes dancing.

“No,” Sam confessed. “It was more of a tease. Just a slap. It was so disconnected, like I wasn’t even there.”

“And you liked it?” Sam nodded reluctantly, and Randy clapped. “Peaches!” Randy applauded. “Well, that’s one big question answered.”

Sam wanted to know what question that was, but something made him afraid to ask. He peeled at the label again. “Why do you call me that? Is it the pet thing?”

“Partly. I call you Peaches because your ass looks like a very nice pair of them.”

“You haven’t seen my ass,” Sam pointed out.

“True. Why don’t you stand up, drop your jeans, and let me find out?”

Sam flipped him off.

Randy blew him another kiss and went back to cooking. He cracked one more egg before reaching for a whisk. “So. We’ve got domination and humiliation so far, which is a nice start. I assume you

like it rough too. Performance, though. That's going to be the real cliffhanger, I can see it already."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Sam demanded.

"Your sexual preferences." Randy began to beat the eggs violently, and let his voice rise to be heard over the sound. "So, what's the answer? You like the idea of being fucked in front of somebody or not?" Sam sputtered. Randy kept beating the eggs, patiently, as if he hadn't just asked a question so personal even Sam wasn't sure of the answer.

"Shy boy," Randy said wistfully, and picked up the frying pan. He reached for a strainer, poured the meat into it, and rinsed. "So asking you if you'd do a threesome is out?"

Sam got up from the table, feeling suddenly shaky. "I'm going to switch my laundry," he said, and left the kitchen.

But Randy's questions haunted him as he pulled the clothes from the washer and put them into the dryer. *You like the idea of being fucked in front of somebody?* His hand shook as he shoved the wet clothes into the dryer. He thought of Craig and what had almost happened, what could have happened, if he'd said yes. He thought, too, of how much he'd wanted it.

Sam swallowed against a suddenly dry throat. Why was Randy asking him all this? Wasn't it Mitch he wanted? This had to be some kind of trick. Some kind of test. Randy was clearly trying to get rid of Sam, so if he admitted that, he'd tell Mitch, and then—

He felt a warm hand on his back, pushing him down, and then another one on his hip as it pulled him roughly back.

"The pizza fuck went something like this?" Randy asked, and he pushed his groin against Sam's ass. "Oh, wait—you said you were on your knees."

The hand pushed harder, and something pressed into the backs of his knees, and Sam gasped as he went down, falling onto his hands and knees to brace himself. He cried out, weakly, and he shut his eyes as Randy began to grind against him, his hand pressing firmly against the back of Sam's neck, keeping him in place.

"Please," Sam whispered, but he shut his eyes, fighting to keep from going slack. "Please—don't."

The hand at his hip skimmed up to stroke his lower back. "See, people think it's easy to fuck with somebody's head, but it isn't. You got to really watch them. Because right now, it's hard to tell, exactly, if this scares the fuck out of you because you hate it, or because you're afraid I'll find out you love it."

Sam shuddered, the pleasure-fear ratio quickening at the thought of being discovered. "Please—*please stop*."

But Randy was kneading hard at his hip now, pushing what was clearly an erection against the back of Sam's jeans, and his own cock hardened in answer. And then Randy's hand was snaking down around toward it, and Sam yelped and fought. He ducked and rolled away. Randy caught him and held him flat on his back, grinning down as he took Sam's hard cock roughly in his hand.

"And the answer is," he said happily, "that you're afraid I'll find out you love it."

Sam tried to knee him, but Randy just dodged and laughed. "*Fuck you,*" he said instead.

"I'd enjoy that very much," Randy said, still smug, and gave Sam one more knead before rising to his feet. He cocked his head to the side and looked down at Sam wickedly.

"Leave me the fuck alone," Sam said, and he tried to kick him again.

Randy made a moue with his lips and sidestepped Sam's foot. "Make it worth my while, Peaches." He pointed at Sam's crotch. "Show me your goods, and I'll be a saint until Mitch gets up, I swear."

"Fuck *off*." Sam climbed to his feet.

"What I'm wondering," Randy said as if Sam hadn't spoken, "is if you're just submissive for Mitch, or if you'd respond to anybody. My money's on anybody. And I think that's why you're so scared."

Sam *was* scared. He started to edge for the kitchen.

Randy blocked him with his arm, and Sam froze, looking to the floor. Randy chuckled. "Oh yeah. I bet you're real fetching in a pair of handcuffs. Better yet, tied up and bent over a bench."

"Stop," Sam whispered, and he shrank back against the wall.

"Show me your cock," Randy whispered, his voice seductive. He didn't touch Sam at all, but Sam felt as if he'd been caressed, and lewdly. "Take it out and let me see it."

Sam tried to edge toward the washer, but Randy trapped him with his other arm. He shut his eyes and swallowed hard. "*Let me go.*"

"See," Randy said, still maddeningly calm, "that's the thing. You want me to let you go, when all you have to do is duck under my arm, or shove me back, and you're gone. You want to be here."

"You'll grab me if I try to go," Sam whispered. He was truly scared now, his throat dry, his teeth aching. He kept hoping Mitch would burst into the kitchen and beat the shit out of Randy, but he knew somehow that wasn't going to happen. He tried to tell himself Mitch wouldn't leave him with someone truly dangerous, but it was hard to believe just now, standing here. His erection, already going soft, faded away to nothing, and he shrank into himself, closing down.

And then, abruptly, Randy was gone.

"And that's too far," Randy said, his seductive tone gone. He backed away, holding up his hands, then bent to finish putting Sam's laundry in the dryer. Sam watched him, stunned, relieved, scared, and confused. *Run*, he thought, and he imagined himself tearing through the kitchen, down the hall to Mitch, of shutting the door, of crawling into the bed beside him, of hiding, of being safe. And he could just imagine the smirk on Randy's face if he did that, and then, all of a sudden, he was furious.

"You *son of a bitch*," he said, and he rushed him.

Randy was rising from the dryer, and when Sam hit him, he slammed the other man against the door, slamming his hip against the front of the machine. When Randy reached up to push him back, Sam grabbed one arm and shoved his body against the machine harder to pin the other. He reached up and grabbed his hair, yanking it hard. "You *fucking son of a bitch!*" he swore, and pressed harder into him. "What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?"

Randy was limp in his arms, his eyes still wide with surprise, and as Sam glared down at him, they twinkled. "See," he said softly, a little breathlessly, "*that* is the right sort of question, Peaches." When Sam just looked at him in confusion, he wriggled his pinned arm free, reached around, and calmly as you please, unzipped himself and pulled

down the waistband of his briefs to reveal a thick, hard, bulging and uncut erection. For a stunned second, Sam just stared down at it. But when he felt his own body begin to respond, he let go as if he'd been scalded and backed up toward the kitchen.

"You," he said, voice shaking, "are seriously fucked up."

"Everybody's fucked up, Peaches," Randy said, unconcerned. He zipped himself up again and shut the door to the dryer. "Go on and get your whites, why don't you, and we'll get those started too."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me! You think I'm going to fall for that twice?"

"Oh no. I'm done baiting you." Randy held up a hand, looking solemn. "No, Peaches, I'm serious. I pushed you too far, and if you tell him about that, he will punch me out, and then you two will be gone, and it's all over. I'm an angel from here on out."

Sam faltered. "*What* is over?"

Randy winked at him as he headed back into the kitchen and on to the living room, where he picked up Sam's laundry. "Sam, you just got more out of me than you deserve. You're not getting that too." He came back through, dumped the whites into the washer, started it up, and headed back to the kitchen, patting Sam's shoulder on his way by. "Sit. Drink. Ask me questions. Nice, boring things, like what I do for a living or where I come from, or how I like living in Vegas. And I'll make you an egg casserole, and we'll eat, and everything will be fine."

Sam watched him cook for a few minutes, trying to decide if he should run, hide, or hit him again. In the end, he just sat down.

"Where are you from?" he asked, wearily.

"Detroit," Randy replied, and as he poured the meat in with the egg and added the cheese and other ingredients, he kept talking, and Sam leaned back in his chair and pretended to listen.

Chapter 10

MITCH slept for three hours. Sam spent the first two edging around Randy and doing laundry, and for the last one he slept beside Mitch, partly to escape Randy, who was getting a look like he wanted to cause more trouble, and partly because he was tired too. The room was warm, though, with sun beating against the curtains and the air conditioning only sort of working in there, so Sam stripped down to the buff before sliding in beside Mitch, who grunted, rolled over, and drew Sam up against his chest before falling back to sleep.

When Sam woke, Mitch was already awake, kissing the back of his neck as he stroked the part of Sam that hadn't needed consciousness to come to life. When Sam made soft moans, Mitch began to stroke him in earnest, and when they both reached a fever pitch, Mitch turned him over and drew their cocks together in his hand, masturbating them both until first he and then Sam came.

"We're hell on sheets," Sam whispered, smiling as he settled, sated, against Mitch's shoulder.

Mitch stroked his arm lazily. "Randy give you any shit while I was out?" When Sam didn't answer, Mitch's hand stilled and fell away. "Fuck. I should have known better." His fingers drifted up again, teasing tentatively at Sam's hair. "You want us to get out of here?"

"He's your friend," Sam said, but was thinking of how Randy had admitted they were also more. "You haven't seen him in a long time."

"You ever think there might be a reason for that?"

Sam lifted his head and looked at him. "Then why did we come here at all? Why didn't you just tell me no?"

"Fuck if I know." Mitch shut his eyes and fell back against his pillow. "It's always this way when I come to Vegas. Starts everything up again. Makes me feel crazy."

"Vegas or Randy?"

"They go hand in hand." Mitch tucked his arm behind his head and looked up at the ceiling. "Randy and I traveled together for years. We worked for the same company, and we pooled our earnings. Randy bought this place, and I bought Old Blue. We did long runs together all over the country, taking turns driving. We got into all kinds of trouble too. That's the thing—the two of us get each other into trouble. I get itchy feet, and Randy gets homesick. He loves Vegas. He loves wild parties and lots of people. I like open spaces. It got bad toward the end. So we split." He sighed, and stroked Sam's shoulder again. "You're kind of witnessing the awkward reunion. Sorry."

Sam lay there for a minute, digesting all this.

"How long, Sunshine?" Mitch asked, quietly. "How long are you gonna stay on the road with me?"

"I—I don't know," Sam faltered.

"Another month? Another week? Another day? When do you want me to look for a job heading east?" He stroked Sam's shoulder. "Or don't you want to go back?"

"I have to go back, eventually," Sam admitted. He stared across the room at a pile of boxes with DVDs sticking out of the top one, all of them balanced precariously on top of an old computer monitor. "All my stuff is there. And I have bills, and—well, I guess at some point I'll have to go back to school. Or drop out. Or something." He swirled his finger in the hair of Mitch's chest. "But I think I'll go back. To school."

"In Iowa," Mitch said, as if for clarification.

"Well—yeah. Since it's where I live."

There was a long, heavy pause.

"You wouldn't… maybe move somewhere else?" Mitch asked. His tone implied he was carefully avoiding land mines.

Sam's heart was beating faster. What was he asking? Why was he asking it? "Well," he said, even more carefully than Mitch, "that would depend."

"On?"

"I need to finish school. If I could go full time this fall, I'd be done by next December." Sam's fingers trailed across Mitch's chest. "After that, I could go anywhere, really. But in other states I'd have to pass the nursing boards. Which isn't that big of a deal, just more money."

More silence.

Sam looked out across the landscape of Mitch's chest, running his fingers into the wiry hairs and down toward his stomach, teasing the lingering beads of semen pooled around his abdomen. "I guess that's real life for you. I can't expect every day to be a vacation."

Mitch said nothing, just continued to stroke Sam's hair.

Sam skimmed his fingers down and rested them on Mitch's hip. "I can probably go another week or so."

"I'll keep my eye out for something heading to Chicago." Mitch's fingers grazed Sam's ear. "What do you want to do, until then? Somewhere else you want to see? Or have you had enough of the road?"

I just want to stay with you. Sam shrugged. "I'm flexible." His finger swirled around Mitch's belly button, making sticky circles. "I just—I don't want to fight anymore."

Mitch snorted. "We shouldn't stay here, in that case."

Sam stared out across the room. He felt oddly numb, but behind it there was a great deal of sadness. *This was going to end.* Something told him being on the road again was only going to amplify this. Maybe it would be easier, here, with Randy reminding him he was just something different to pass the time, a buffalo after all.

"We can play it by ear," Sam said, sliding his leg alongside Mitch's beneath the sheets.

Mitch nuzzled Sam's forehead as Sam's fingers slipped down, and then the door to the bedroom opened, and then they were both scrambling to get out of the way as Randy launched himself headlong at the center of the mattress.

"Skeet," Mitch growled, tugging the sheet back up over Sam's middle, "You are a fucking menace."

"What do you expect, if the two of you are going to stay in here all afternoon and party without me?" Randy rolled over onto his back, his eyes boldly raking Sam's naked body, especially his belly. "I see Peaches has already had his shower."

Mitch pulled the sheet higher, subtly wiping at the semen on Sam's skin as he did so. "Don't you have a job, or something?"

"Off today." Randy's grin showed teeth. "And tonight. What do you say we show your little cherub a night on the town? We can do the mild version tonight, but let me pull some strings at work and maybe tomorrow we can get into something really serious to carry us into the weekend."

"Where do you work?" Sam asked, feeling moderately safe in the circle of Mitch's arms, even if Randy was eyeing him like he was a Vegas buffet.

"I do short runs for a company operating out of Vegas, but I work distribution there, too, and I play poker, and sometimes I tend bar at the Hole. Which," he said, leaning over to slap Mitch's leg, "we need to get you to, now that you're conscious. People will want to say hi."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Mitch said, but Sam was listening carefully, and he thought he heard some longing in his voice.

Sam turned in his arms and looked up at him. "I don't care where we go. I mean, it'd be fun to see the Strip at night, but even a cab ride would be enough."

"You cannot come to Vegas and just take a cab ride!" Randy said, horrified.

"Sam, heading anywhere with this idiot is going to land us in trouble," Mitch warned.

Now Randy was angry. "What, you don't come home for two years, and you give me your laundry while you take a nap, and that's all I get?" He sneered. "Well, I guess you haven't changed."

Mitch tensed, and Sam held up a hand. "Hold on—both of you." He looked up at Mitch again. "Mitch, I'd love to meet your friends. Or your enemies. Or whatever. A night on the town sounds really fun. I've never done that before, except in Denver with you." Mitch's eyes softened, reflecting remembered heat, and Sam blushed before turning to Randy. "You're insane, but I bet you're fun. If you can stop trying to

scare me off every ten seconds, I'd be open to a night out with you." When Randy just lifted an eyebrow at him, he folded his arm over his chest, resolute. "Yes, I know you'd rather just have Mitch to yourself, but I'm here, so just cope."

"I'm not trying to scare you off." Randy leaned on one elbow and gave Mitch a wicked look. "*He* knows what I want. And I know what *he* wants."

"Fuck off," Mitch said, angry again.

Randy blew him a kiss and slid closer to Sam. "A night out sounds fun. We'll get dressed, go to the bar, hit a buffet for dinner, and run up and down the Strip." He reached out and touched Sam's clavicle, tracing the line of it to his sternum. "Maybe we can even catch a show. Who do you want to see, Peaches?"

His finger was tracing the planes of Sam's chest, and they all watched, hypnotized. Sam felt the touch like an electric charge, especially when Mitch didn't say anything, just watched, too, his fingers tightening slightly on the sheet over Sam's stomach.

Sam swallowed, trying not to shiver as Randy's finger strayed near his nipple. "I—I don't know. Anything is fine."

"I thought you looked flexible." Randy's finger skirted the dark ring of his target. "Something edgy, I think. Off the Strip, maybe." His fingers splayed, five points resting on Sam's chest, his middle and index spanning the nipple. The fingers moved, grazing it, and Sam watched it form a tentative peak. Everyone watched.

Randy smiled at it, and flicked his finger over it again. Sam twitched but otherwise didn't move. Mitch's hand flexed, and Sam felt his breathing quicken, but otherwise, he gave no reaction.

Randy began to stroke the nipple more regularly until it was a prominent, pink and hardened bud.

"We could go to the Stratosphere," he said, still rotating his thumb over the sensitive area. "You haven't been up the tower, Mitch, since they put in the rides."

"Sam doesn't like heights." Mitch's fingers were sliding lower down Sam's belly, pulling the sheet with them. They teased the tip of Sam's erection, and Mitch pressed his hips forward, letting Sam feel his own.

Randy's thumb sneaked up to join his fingers, and he pinched Sam's nipple gently. "That's a shame. We'll just have to think of something else to do that all three of us can enjoy." He pinched again, and Sam shuddered. "What do you say, Sam? What should the three of us do?"

Sam couldn't breathe. He watched Randy gently tweak his nipple, felt Mitch close his hand over his erection beneath the sheet, and simply held still, letting the men touch him. The tension between them was so tight it bounced, but Randy was sliding beneath it, his entry point Sam's nipple.

Then Randy leaned forward, pinched the nipple firmly once more, and licked it.

Sam gasped as he watched the tongue dart out, pink and fat, and he shuddered as it scraped over his flesh. Behind him he felt Mitch swell.

"Randy," Mitch growled, but it was difficult to tell if he spoke in anger or desire.

"Shh." Randy licked again. Sam shut his eyes and pressed helplessly into Mitch's hand. Randy laughed. "See? He likes it." He licked a third time, laving him openly, and Sam gave up and cried out.

"Mitch," he called, and he arched toward Randy's mouth.

"Sunshine." Mitch's voice was low and rough. "Do you want him to stop?"

No, Sam thought, but couldn't bring himself to say.

"Such sweet little buds," Randy whispered, his other hand sliding over Sam's stomach. "Just let me play with him awhile. You like to watch, Mitch. Watch this."

Sam cried out as Randy's mouth closed over his nipple, sucking the small bud into his mouth. His fingers dug into the mattress as Randy teased the sensitive flesh with his teeth, then opened his mouth over it and flicked lewdly with his tongue as his hand slid down over Sam's stomach, seeking out the sticky residue. Then he slid farther down, teasing at the nest of curls around Sam's erection.

Sam held himself back, too afraid to let go. What did Mitch think of this? What would this do to them? He tried to turn to look at him, but Randy suckled again, and he convulsed. He felt Mitch's hand

tighten tentatively on his hair and felt his other hand slide over the edge of the sheet. Mitch's cock, hot and hard, pressed between the juncture of his legs, sliding against Sam's aching balls as his hand grazed Sam's thigh. Sam felt the hand hesitating, and he knew Mitch wanted to open him, to give him to Randy's waiting hand. Sam wanted him to. He wanted to yield, to be exposed, to feel both men's hands on him.

I want this, Sam admitted to himself, and he let his body go slack and pliant, waiting for Mitch to take him over the edge.

But Mitch's hand slid up, not down, and it shoved Randy gently but firmly away.

"Give us a minute, Skeet," Mitch said, his voice no longer gruff.

Randy lifted his head, a protest ready on his lips, but whatever he saw in Mitch's eyes stilled him. He shut his mouth and nodded curtly before drawing back, and to Sam's surprise, without so much as a saucy comment, he left the room.

Mitch waited until Randy had left the room. Then he rolled Sam onto his back and leaned over him.

His expression was strange. He looked sad, and eager, and… something else. Resigned? And yet hopeful. He was a strange, un-Mitch-like mix, and it made Sam's own confusion all the worse.

"Sunshine," Mitch said carefully. "Do you want to do this?"

"I don't know." Sam lowered his eyes to Mitch's chest, feeling his face heat. "Maybe?"

"We've been dancin' around this for awhile." Mitch stroked his cheek. "I'll admit, you open up like a flower, Sam, when two men touch you. But I don't—I don't want you to get hurt."

"I don't know," Sam said again, a little desperate. "I can't—I can't do it with just anyone." He flushed deeper. "I don't want to make things awkward for you."

"Having sex with you is not awkward," Mitch said. "And I will admit, I like the idea of… sharing. I like the idea of doing this with you. But not if it's going to hurt you. And Randy—" He wiped his mouth. "Randy's a bit fucked up. You sure you want it to be with him?"

Sam didn't know that either. He worried about what Randy was doing, about his jealousy. But what right did he have to be like that? Randy would stay in Mitch's life. He wouldn't.

"We can get an escort," Mitch suggested, skimming his hand up Sam's hip. "It doesn't have to be him."

But Sam knew that it did, somehow. They could bring in anybody to be the third, but Randy would still be there, forever between them. *Finish this,* he told himself. *Finish this, one way or another.* He lifted his face and looked at Mitch.

"I want to do it," he said, his heart beating loudly in his ears.

Mitch nodded, and this time Sam couldn't read anything on his face.

"We'll go slow," he said, stroking Sam's hip. "You can back out at any time. I'll keep him in check. You decide, Sam. You make all the rules. I won't let anything happen to you that you don't want."

Sam nodded. When Mitch bent down to kiss him, he opened for him, both his mouth and his body, and he let himself go, praying he hadn't just made a terrible, irreparable mistake.

THEY started at the Watering Hole.

This was a small bar not far from Randy's house, which while not strictly gay, at the very least didn't mind what side of the fence its patrons were on. Or maybe they just didn't mind Randy. Everyone in the bar knew him and either greeted him with a lusty shout or a glare over the top of their drinks. The bartender gave him a nod and served up a draft for him automatically, and Randy accepted it gratefully, but with some pride, clearly enjoying his position in this public court.

They recognized Mitch, too, and his reception was different. It was a man at the end of the bar who saw him first, and he stood, stared, and laughed. "Mitch Tedsoe!" he called out, as if he couldn't believe it and embraced him. Others soon followed, but there was no bellow of welcome for him, just quiet, surprised, and pleased expressions of welcome. Sam noticed, though, that whispers began to fly behind Mitch in his wake as he made his way across the room. Many people looked at Sam too. And as Mitch had predicted, they regarded Sam with either

derision or leers. As much as Sam had said he didn't care, he found that, actually, he did.

Randy came back to where Mitch was lingering and took his hand, tugging him farther into the bar. "Come on, Old Man, and say hello."

But Mitch held back, turning to Sam. Sam held up his hand and indicated his head at the bar. He didn't need to go into the nest of them just yet. "You go on. I'll sit here and get something to drink."

Mitch frowned, then nodded and reached into his pocket. Sam caught what he was after and stepped forward, quickly staying the gesture.

"I have money," he said, embarrassed.

Mitch brushed off his hand and pulled out his wallet anyway. "Just shut up and take the money, Sunshine," he said, pressed the money into Sam's hand with a gentle caress at his wrist and turned to follow Randy. Sam looked down at the money, sighed, and shoved it into his own pocket before heading back to the bar.

The man who had greeted Mitch was watching him, and when he caught Sam's eye, he raised his glass in silent toast and nodded to the empty stool beside him. "Come take a load off, sugar, and I'll buy your first round."

Sam sank into the chair, but he stuck out his hand as he did so. "Hi. I'm Sam," he said. *Please don't treat me like a back alley whore.*

The man was leaning against the bar, his right arm draped over his midsection and hanging off his other hip. He unwrapped himself and sat up, extending a long, beautiful chocolate hand to engulf Sam's. "Tyke." He gestured to the bartender. "What are you drinkin', Sam?"

"Um—" Sam glanced quickly toward the taps, but he couldn't see them. "Just a beer. Blue Moon would be nice, if they have it."

They did, and Sam was soon sipping at a tall pint with an orange in the bottom as he sat with Tyke, watching Randy and Mitch make their way around the bar. In the background club music was playing, and Sam tapped his toe a little as he drank and soaked up the atmosphere.

"So the circus is back in town." Tyke shook his head. "I thought those two were finished for good, but I guess not."

"You know the both of them?" Sam asked, trying not to sound too eager for information.

"Ain't nobody in here doesn't know them or of them. Used to be the best show in town, to sit here at this bar and watch those two carry on. Sometimes they were fightin', sometimes they were neckin', and sometimes both. Of course, the best shows were when they brought in a third party." He gave Sam a look up and down. "That gonna be you tonight, sweetheart?"

Sam said nothing and retreated into his beer, but he suspected his ears were red.

Tyke snorted and shook his head. "Shit. Well, luck to you."

"I'm not really one for putting on a show," Sam said, trying to tamp this down before it got started.

"Don't matter. Randy will make sure you do." Tyke was leaning on the bar, watching as Randy waved his arms and told a story to a group of men at the far wall, while Mitch stood by, reserved, but also softening somewhat. "You came in with the big one, didn't you? You with him? Or did they pick you up together?"

Sam didn't like how clinical this analysis was, but he didn't think he could afford not to get as full a diagnosis as he could. "I've been traveling with Mitch."

"Oh, one of *those*." Tyke nodded, gravely. He patted Sam on the bar before motioning to the bartender. "Joe—couple of tequilas over here, huh?"

"Um—thanks, but I'll stick to beer," Sam said quickly.

"Sugar, you're gonna need at least three shots of something, if you're tangoing with those two." He grimaced, still watching Mitch and Randy. "If you're with Mitch, that means Randy's on your ass. He's either trying to scare you or steal you. And trust me, sweetheart, it will be one or the other."

"But Randy said he wasn't interested in Mitch," Sam protested. "I mean—I think he wants to sleep with him again, but he doesn't—"

"That boy don't know what he wants," Tyke said, with some disgust, "except that he wants that big guy. He doesn't exactly want to fuck him, but he sure does love fucking *with* him, and I mean that in every sense of the word. They don't sit well together, not for long, and

something always blows up when they hook up, but they keep coming back." He shook his head. "I was here for their last one two years ago. That was the worst. Mitch came in with a boyfriend. He wasn't going to pay any attention to Randy, he said. They were over, he said, for good." Tyke picked up his tequila, swirled it, and set it back down before reaching for the salt. "By ten, the three of them were in a back booth, the boyfriend's legs hooked one each over both their knees, eyes rollin' back in his head. By eleven he was out in the alley getting it from behind by Randy. By midnight they'd taken off. Mitch got really drunk, and when Randy came back at two, gloating, Mitch punched him out cold. They had to take Randy to the hospital, and by the time he got out, Mitch was gone."

Sam stared across the room for a moment, able to imagine this scenario all too clearly. Then Randy caught him looking, winked, and Sam quickly retreated into his beer, taking a long, long drink. When he put the glass down, Tyke pushed the tequila in front of him, and the salt, and Sam licked his wrist. Once he knocked the shot back, Tyke handed him the lime, but as his hand came away, his fingers lightly stroked Sam's wrist.

"You want to blow off these losers, baby, and come party with me instead?"

Sam took the lime out of his mouth, stared at the bar a second, then gave in and laughed. When Tyke raised an eyebrow, he shook his head and reached for his beer. "I have been hit on more in the past four days," he said, "than I have ever been in my life."

"That's just sad." Tyke pushed another tequila at him. "Where you from? Kansas?"

"Iowa," Sam said and reached for the salt.

"Shit." Tyke licked his wrist and took the salt from Sam. "Wait, they got gay marriage in Iowa, don't they?"

Sam knocked back the shot and nodded as he reached for a lime. "But," he said, paused to suck, and then finished, "it didn't do much for my dating stock."

"Well come on then, babe—let's go party. Let those two fuck each other up." Tyke's hand slid up Sam's thigh. "Let *me* fuck *you*."

Sam didn't move his hand, but he shook his head. "Mitch is my ride back home," he said, adding, because that seemed too crass, "and I like him."

"Fuck." Tyke shook his head. "Joe," he shouted to the bartender, "this poor boy's drinks are all on my tab tonight. It's the least I can do."

"*No*." Sam stood, pulled out his wallet, and produced the fifty he'd tucked behind his library card. He handed it to the bartender. "That's for *his* drinks, and mine, and Mitch's and Randy's." He lifted his chin. "If you take credit cards, I'll cover their tabs at the end of the night too."

He hadn't tested his card after reactivating it this afternoon, but he figured the odds that Mitch would let him get away with that were low anyway. What mattered was right now, where Tyke and the bartender and several other strangers were looking at him, impressed. Either that or they thought he was crazy.

Whatever they thought, though, it felt good, and when the song shifted and Bananarama's "Twisting" started to play, he rode the feeling and turned to Tyke, grinning as he took his hand. "Dance with me," he said.

Tyke laughed and pulled back. "Fuck no! You aren't dragging me into this bullshit."

"I'll let you feel my ass," Sam said, and he delighted at the dark light he saw pass over Tyke's eyes.

"You'll let me feel your dick, for that," he said, and he rose, taking Sam into his arms. The bartender grinned, reached over to a knob on the wall, and the music got louder. Tyke led Sam out into the middle of the floor, sliding his body against Sam's own, spinning him so that they were back to front, and there, in the middle of the room, his hands made their way down his sides, his hips, his thighs and—with everyone watching—made good on his threat.

Sam lifted his arms, laughing, and wrapped his hands around the back of Tyke's neck as he let the man lead him in an undulating dance. He ignored Randy, who looked surprised, focusing instead on Mitch, who was hard to read. His smile faltered a little, and he paused, still moving with Tyke, but he kept watching Mitch, waiting for any sign that this was too far, and that he should stop. But Mitch just watched, and then, slowly, gave him a tiny, sensual smile.

Randy stood and came over toward him, and Sam knew Mitch wouldn't be far behind. *Here we go,* Sam thought, shut his eyes, and surrendered himself to his dance with Tyke, knowing it wouldn't last very long.

BUT Sam did dance a while with Tyke, all the way through the song, in fact, and when it was over and several of the patrons applauded, it was Randy who clapped the loudest. And it was Randy who took his arm, slid his hand to Sam's hip, and led him across the room by his belt loop to where Mitch was chatting with old friends. He kept Sam at his side, sliding his hand over his back, his butt, and his body in general, movement which, Sam saw, was quietly noticed by everyone.

He kept himself still, pretending he didn't notice, but he did, and he liked it. He worried about what Tyke had told him, and for the sake of their audience he kept himself non-responsive, but this only made Randy bolder, which in turn made Sam more aroused. He didn't know what it was about him that made him want to be treated like this, and it upset him a little to find out he wanted it done in front of other people. Humiliation: that's what it was, and since he wanted this, humiliation was apparently what he wanted. As he stood smiling and pretending to listen to the conversations of the men around him, talking about markets and politics and health care, Randy fondled him openly and Sam bounced between enjoying it beyond his wildest expectation and worrying that the next thing he knew he'd be tied up in some S&M dungeon with a tail sticking out of his ass and a ball gag in his mouth while men peed on him.

Because he'd been reading about this sort of thing when Mitch couldn't see what he was scanning through on his iPhone, and he knew that what he was doing was turning into a *sub*. Subordinate. Submissive. Someone who wanted people to do things to him, to shame him, to punish him. It sounded fine, even exciting in theory, but when he saw some of the sites and worse, read the free online porn, he lost all his taste for it. He didn't want to call Mitch "Master" or even "Sir." That was just weird. Fine for other people, but he'd feel really stupid saying that to Mitch. But that was where the safe word thing had come

from. He'd figured that out. So Mitch must have been into this, or at least knew about it. Sam didn't want to be in "the scene."

He didn't want a collar. The tying up was okay. The kinky sex was absolutely fine. And he wanted to do whatever this was they were doing with Randy, even if it was probably the stupidest thing he'd ever done. It was hot. It felt good. It felt dangerous. It was a dangerous man groping him and displaying his possession against Sam's will, in front of Mitch, whom he actually wanted. Sam was just an object, just a thing to Randy, little more than a walking sex toy he could turn on whenever he wanted.

It felt so, so good.

So good, in fact, that he had to break off what Randy was doing to him or risk humping the edge of the table or at the very least crying out in breathy gasps, which he was sure Randy and even Mitch would love, but was more performance than he was willing to give. With barely any warning, he lowered his hands, murmured an excuse, and stumbled across the bar toward the bathroom with as much grace as he could manage, which wasn't much at all. He did, though, manage to return Tyke's salute on his way into the hall. Once he was inside the bathroom, though, he went to the corner, pressed his hands to the cool concrete block of the wall, and sank wearily against it as he waited for his erection to go down.

When someone put a hand on his shoulder, he nearly leapt out of his skin, and he turned bracing for more of Randy's molestation. "Just give me five fucking minutes," he snapped, but when he looked up, it wasn't Randy. It was Mitch.

Mitch looked surprised, and chagrined, and he started to back away.

Sam reached out, grabbed the front of his shirt, hauled him back into the corner and kissed him.

"I thought you were Randy," he whispered, nibbling at his lips before diving in again. "Oh my God, Mitch, I'm going to come in my goddamn pants!"

Mitch laughed, low and wicked, thrusting his tongue once deep into Sam's mouth before sliding his lips down his chin and neck. "I can take care of that," he said, and he unbuckled Sam's jeans.

“Not here!” Sam cried, but Mitch was already on his knees, and his erection, leaking pre-cum, was in his hand and headed for his mouth.

“Wish you would have worn the ripped jeans,” Mitch murmured, took hold of his thighs, and swallowed Sam down.

Sam came immediately and violently into Mitch’s mouth. He twitched for several seconds after, pumping helplessly into Mitch as the other man swallowed and lapped at him several times before zipping Sam away again. He wiped at his mouth as he rose, looking very, very pleased with himself.

“Having a good time, Sunshine?” he asked.

Sam made a strangled sound and collapsed against him. “Oh my God, it felt so… lewd, standing there, letting him feel me up. I mean, he *grabbed my cock* once, right through my jeans. He had his hand down the back of my pants! He had his *finger in my ass!* Right there, where anyone could see!” He shuddered again, shut his eyes, and nipped at Mitch’s buttons. “Mitch, am I depraved?” he asked, fearfully.

“In the most beautiful, wonderful way,” Mitch assured him, kissing the top of his head. “Come on. Let’s go fuck with his head some more.”

“How was I fucking with his head?” Sam asked, bewildered, as Mitch led him back out into the bar.

“You stood so still. You didn’t react at all, and then you ran,” Mitch pointed out.

“I reacted,” Sam said. “And trust me, he knew. He felt, anyway.”

But Mitch just shook his head, looking more pleased than ever. “Just keep up the good work, Sunshine,” he said and patted Sam’s ass.

Sam wanted to balk, to take him back into the shadow and reassure him that he didn’t want to fuck things up between the two of them again, that he didn’t want to be what Tyke had described, but he couldn’t figure out how to word it without sounding stupid, so he just followed him to the booth, where Randy had sat down in the place where Mitch had been. He looked up at their arrival, and started to rise, but Mitch just shook his head, and he stayed where he was. Randy did look uncertain, Sam realized, surprised. He looked even more confused

when Mitch nudged Sam over to sit beside him and sat in the space across from them himself.

"So you're from Iowa, are ya?" one of the guys said, leaning back and looking right at Sam as he settled in. When Sam nodded, he narrowed his eyes. "Hawkeyes or Cyclones?"

"I'm not really one for sports," Sam admitted. "Though I always thought it would be pretty to live in Ames, so Cyclones, I guess."

The man grunted in reluctant approval. "I'm from Sioux City. Born and raised. Moved out here ten years ago because I got sick of the snow. But I did like goin' to Ames for the football games. Especially the Iowa/Iowa State game. God, that was a good drunk." He elbowed Mitch. "Usually could convince some of the frat boys to give you a piece, too, if you played your cards right."

The thought of introducing himself to frat boys for a fucking both excited and terrified Sam. He reached for the beer he'd been drinking before, and found it was refilled.

"You go to Iowa State?" the Sioux City man asked.

Sam shook his head as he set his beer back down. "Middleton Community College. I'm studying nursing."

It was a little depressing that even at a table full of gay men, this still garnered snickers, though he quickly learned it was for other reasons when a man on the other side of Randy asked if he was giving free physicals later. Sam blushed, but smiled shyly, and retreated, leaning against the back of the booth.

Randy's hand slid over and stroked his thigh.

It was a tentative move, which made Sam feel a little wicked, to realize he'd managed to unnerve a man he had been starting to think was part goat. So Sam decided to encourage him a little, pressing his legs apart and giving him a quiet invitation to continue what he'd been doing. It was a lot easier now that he'd had some release, but when Randy's hand slid between his legs, cupping him, he still reacted, though thankfully not as strongly.

Sam looked across the table. Mitch was watching, and his gaze made Sam bolder still, opening even more for Randy's increasingly daring fingers. His eyes were all for Mitch, though, reveling in the way *he* watched so boldly, clearly knowing what was going on underneath

the table, clearly enjoying it as much as Sam was. He remembered the way Mitch had nudged him at Randy, like he was giving Sam to his friend. The memory made Sam shudder.

Randy leaned over and nuzzled Sam's cheek. "You doin' okay, Peaches?" When Sam nodded, Randy purred and slid Sam's zipper down. Sam didn't move, not until Mitch's foot slid forward and nuzzled his own, and he shivered. Randy glanced across the table at Mitch, his expression wicked as he deftly pulled Sam's half-rigid cock from his underwear.

"You're a little under the weather," Randy murmured, stroking him. "Don't tell me I'm doing something wrong."

Sam shook his head, still looking at Mitch. "Huh-uh."

"Scared?" Randy whispered, and he licked Sam's ear.

The toe of Mitch's boot ran up the inside of his jeans, and Sam shut his eyes. "No," he whispered, and tipped his head back to give Randy better access to his neck.

But Randy sat up, and his hand on Sam's cock was suddenly a little tight. Sam opened his eyes and saw Randy narrowing his eyes at Mitch, who was looking very smug. Randy let go of Sam and swore under his breath.

"You whore," he said, whether to Sam or Mitch it wasn't clear.

Mitch laughed and offered up a mocking kiss to him before turning to Sam. "You ready to go have dinner on the Strip, Sunshine?"

It had been a long time since Randy's egg casserole, which hadn't digested well with how unsettled he'd been over the laundry incident. Sam nodded, fastened his pants, and took one last drink of his beer before rising with Mitch out of the booth. Randy came, too, but he didn't touch Sam anymore as he and Mitch said their goodbyes to their friends, not until they were heading out the door, and there he did nothing more than grab Sam's elbow.

"You let him get you off in the bathroom," he accused.

Mitch heard him and tossed his keys in his hand with a joyful twist.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Well, you know the rules. You only get so long at the piñata, and then someone else gets to try."

That made Randy laugh, but Mitch looked sheepish. “Sorry, Sunshine. I don’t mean to make you a game.”

Sam squeezed his arm. “I don’t mind,” he said, and he warmed when Mitch smiled at him.

Mitch drove, leaving Randy to enjoy free rein with Sam, but he was much less aggressive than he had been. He was still smarting, apparently, from being bested, and was seeking a new course of action. But Sam thought maybe he respected Sam a little more too. *Maybe this will work, and I won’t screw them up again.* He encouraged Randy’s hand a little higher on this thigh.

They parked in a garage and made their way up the Strip, letting Sam gawk and point at the lights and the sights. He saw the Luxor pyramid, and the castle of Excalibur, and the mini New York City. They ate at the buffet at the Mirage, then stopped at the Paris casino and gambled a little, but after losing five dollars in less than three minutes, Sam was horrified and refused to play anymore, preferring to sit on Mitch’s knee and cheer him on, until he, too, gave up, and they went to find where Randy had gone.

“I can’t believe you just lost forty dollars that fast, and you don’t care,” Sam said, still shaken by the thought as he followed him across the casino floor.

“Randy will make up for it,” Mitch said, unconcerned. “But, speaking of money—” He pulled a fifty out of his pocket and handed it to Sam. “I believe this is yours.”

Sam stopped short and stared at the money. “Is that—Mitch, is that the money I put down at the bar?”

“I gave you money.” Mitch tried to stick the bill in Sam’s pocket.

Sam backed away, getting angry. “I wanted to buy my own drink. And I bought Tyke’s too!” When Mitch caught his hands and forced the bill into his jeans, he fought him, torn between his rage and his reluctance to make a scene. “*Mitch!*”

“You need to save your money for school.” Mitch shoved the money in place and let him go. Sam sputtered and reared back to give him some sass, but Mitch just turned and walked away, calm as you please, leaving Sam little choice but to trail along behind him, quietly steaming. When they came to the blackjack table where Randy was

playing, Sam very deliberately went to the other side of Randy, keeping himself as far away from Mitch as possible.

"Uh-oh, looks like trouble in paradise," Randy murmured, sounding pleased. He kept his eyes on the table as the dealer laid down his card, then raised a finger to indicate he wanted another.

Sam said nothing, just watched the card come down. Randy held up his hand, sat back, and waited, first as the other player went over and then as the dealer turned his own card and then turned another, which made him go over twenty-one as well. Randy clapped his hands once and looked with satisfaction down at the cards.

"Peaches, you bring me luck," he said, and he scooped up his chips.

"Figured you'd be playing poker," Mitch said.

"Warming up, warming up," Randy replied. He stood, put an arm around each of their shoulders, and glanced between the two of them. He did a double take at Sam. "Peaches, what happened?"

"Leave it," Mitch said, which only made Sam angrier.

He slid his arm around Randy's waist. "So, you're good at gambling?"

"I'm not bad," Randy said, clearly indicating that he thought he was pretty fucking good.

Sam reached into his pocket, pulled out the fifty, and held it up. "Win something with this for me."

Randy looked puzzled, but when he caught Mitch's glower, he laughed. "Okay. But what do I get for it?"

"Well—" Sam didn't know. He didn't care. He just liked seeing Mitch not looking so sure of himself. "The money?"

"I don't *want* the money, honey." Randy slid his hand down Sam's back. "What do I get, Sam, if I double this for you?"

His hand was teasing at Sam's waistband, his thumb lifting up Sam's T-shirt to scrape against his skin, and the motion bled the last of his anger out of him. "I—I don't know. What do you want?"

"Shit," Mitch murmured, and unhooked himself from Randy and turned away. Sam saw him reaching for his packet of cigarettes.

"Peaches, Peaches, Peaches," Randy said, "you are so much fun. What do I want? Oh my. The possibilities. Let me think."

Sam swallowed as Randy's fingers slipped into his waistband again. It was a given he'd be offering some sort of sexual act. "I—" His voice broke, and he cleared his throat. "I could give you a blow job," he said very quietly.

"Boring." Randy's fingers slid down, and one wedged between his cheeks. "I want this, honey. Your ass."

Sam stiffened. "I'm not going to let you fuck me for—"

"Not fuck," Randy corrected, and caressed Sam's cheek. "I want to lick it."

Heat slammed into Sam. He stumbled forward, and caught himself. "For h-how long?"

"How long did you give Mitch in the bathroom?" he shot back.

Sam blushed. "A minute and a half?"

"I want five," Randy said. He nodded at Mitch. "And he watches."

That, actually, had been the only part Sam had worried about: being alone with Randy. He nodded. "Okay," he said. "What do I get if you lose?"

"What do you want?" Randy shot back.

Sam had no idea. He tried to think of what Randy had that he wanted. Anything sexual would please him, and he wasn't sure he wanted to ask for that at any rate. He bit his lip, trying to think of something.

"I won't lose, just so you know," Randy said, unhooking his arm to pocket the fifty. "How about if I lose, I teach you to play poker?"

"If you lose," Sam said, thinking fast, "you have to answer any questions I ask honestly for five minutes."

"Deal," he said, tucked his cup of chips into the crook of his arm and rubbed his hands together. "Now. Who's dealing tonight?"

It took Randy several minutes, actually, to choose a table, and when he finally sat down, he was very serious in his play. Sam stood behind him, watching, not really understanding what was in his hand, but he watched as the game unfolded, and then, suddenly, concluded.

Randy lost.

"Patience," he said when Sam gave him a look of surprise. "Poker is about the pot, Peaches. Besides, I'm still warming up my hands." He leaned close and added, "I'll be sure to have them nice and warm before I collect."

Sam retreated behind the chair, and didn't shrink away when Mitch came up beside him.

"What'd you bet?" he asked, as they watched the dealer pass out new cards.

Sam leaned in close and whispered to him. Mitch gave a quiet grunt that could have meant anything, and Sam added, "But you have to watch."

Mitch's lips quirked in a small smile. He leaned forward and clapped a hand on Randy's shoulder. "Win big, Skeet." He rocked back on his heels, settling in to watch.

And Randy did. He took the next hand, and the one after that. He lost on the third but not much, and he won three times in a row after that. He picked up his stack, held them up near his shoulder without turning around and said, "That's one hundred, Peaches."

Sam went hot, but he wasn't blushing. "Oh," he said, hypnotized by the neat stack of chips. They might as well have been a dildo, for their effect on him.

But then they vanished, and Randy was setting them back on the table. "Double or nothing," he said, motioning to the dealer. "I'm in for another."

"All at once?" Sam cried.

"That's not how you play poker," Randy said, but he wasn't mocking. "No worries, baby. I'll get you your money. You just sit back and watch."

Sam did, trying not to look like a yokel as he watched Randy's hands lift up his cards, his long fingers curling over the edges. He won his hand, pushed out more chips, and won the next too. He lost two after that, but the next pot was huge, and he won it, and after the next hand, when Randy won again, a huge grin split his face, and Sam knew he'd made it.

Randy rose, nodded to his fellow players, and scooped up his chips. When he turned around, he kissed Sam on his cheek. “Time to collect.”

Sam rubbed the spot on his face that he’d kissed. It felt electric. “What—*now*?”

“That’s right.” Randy looked at Mitch, and for a minute it was the poker game all over again. But whatever was transpiring between their stoic exchange, Randy seemed to lose. He looked away and shook his head. “Double bluff. I should have known.”

“What?” Sam said. His heart was hammering so hard it echoed in his head.

“I think we can find a place down the hallway on the second floor.” Mitch jerked his head toward an escalator.

Randy snorted and pulled Sam up against him. “You can’t let him win all night, you know.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Sam whispered, tripping over his feet as they led him away from the floor.

“If I’d have known how badly he wanted to watch,” Randy said, still irritated, “I would have insisted he not.”

“I wouldn’t have agreed.” Sam caught the eye of several people they passed, wondering what they’d think if they knew he was about to go off and let someone lick his ass to satisfy a bet.

“Yes, I know.” Randy pursed his lips. “I’m losing my touch, I think.”

“We’re seriously going to do this *in the hotel*?” Sam asked, feeling they’d strayed from the important detail of this scene.

“Know just the place,” Mitch said, sounding very cheerful as he hopped onto the bottom stair of the escalator.

“You’ve done this *before*?” Sam said.

“Yes,” Mitch answered, but at the same time Randy said quietly, “Not quite like this.”

Chapter 11

THEY led Sam to a bathroom.

It was a single stall far, far at the end of a hall, situated near a ballroom which, at the moment, wasn't being used. The way to it was dark, and from the look the security guard gave them, they weren't the first ones to consider the out of the way room's potential alternate uses. But Sam quickly learned he'd misunderstood the look, because as soon as Mitch pressed some money into his hand, the guard smiled, nodded, and quickly moved away.

"In you go," Randy said, hustling him inside. Once they were in, he pressed Sam against the corner by the mirror. Behind them, Sam heard Mitch lock the door.

Then Randy's hands were on Sam's waistband, and his fly, and then he was gasping softly as his jeans and underwear slid down his hips. He shut his eyes tightly, feeling hot and cold at once, and completely terrified as Randy's hands—warm as promised—slid tenderly over the bare cheeks of his backside.

"Ten minutes," he said silkily. "Start the clock, Tedsoe."

Double or nothing. Sam felt slight pressure on his butt as Randy knelt down and settled his knees against the floor. He opened his eyes and caught sight of Mitch in the mirror, saw him leaning lazily against the door, his eyes intent on Sam's bare ass. Doubt swelled up suddenly in Sam, swamping any remaining lust.

"They are a fine pair of peaches, Peaches." Randy slid his finger down Sam's crack.

Sam shivered. *Wait,* he tried to call, but his throat was too dry to speak. He licked his lips, swallowed, and tried again. “Wai—”

Then Randy parted his flesh, pressed his tongue against Sam’s opening, and Sam’s speech was lost to a low, helpless moan.

Wet. Sam pressed his forehead into the juncture of the mirror and the wall, curling his fingers against tile and glass as Randy’s tongue ran up and down the length of him, lightly at first, and then, with no warning, he came at Sam with a fierce pressure, pushing hard against his anus, wiggling until Sam gasped, flexed, then gave way and let him inside.

Mitch is watching. Mitch is watching this happen to you. The thought sent Sam into a terrifying orbit, and it was this alone that gave him the strength to open his eyes and look through bleary lust and terror to find him in the mirror, but Mitch was still just standing there, arms folded, watching. The only thing about him that had changed was his face, and as soon as Sam was aware of it, he couldn’t look away.

Mitch wasn’t angry. Mitch was… something. Aroused wasn’t the right word. That implied something nicer than what Sam saw. What Mitch looked like was what Sam felt, or wanted to feel, when he looked at really dirty porn. This was what Sam felt without the guilt. This was a man watching raw sex and liking what he saw. It had nothing to do with Sam, even though as soon as Sam thought this, he knew that wasn’t true, even before Mitch's eyes lifted, caught Sam’s, and the tenderness came back.

You okay?

No words, but Sam heard them all the same. And they were enough. He relaxed a little, nodded imperceptibly and shut his eyes, sliding back into the sensations Randy was giving him.

And Randy was definitely giving him sensations. Sam sank into the corner, trying to find the counterpoint within himself to what he’d seen in Mitch’s face. It felt so good, what Randy was doing, and part of him—most of him—was only turned on by the fact that he was doing this because he lost a bet, because Randy wanted to use him, both for his own pleasure and to get a rise out of Mitch. But the part of him that had spent the last ten years feeling guilty for wanting this was screaming, and it took him away from full release. So as Randy licked and thrust and wiggled his tongue up, down, around and inside Sam’s

backside, Sam pressed his cheek to the mirror and fought for breath as desperately as he battled to keep his shame at bay.

He felt a hand touch his shoulder. Turning, dizzy, Sam saw Mitch standing there, looking at him intently. Sam let out a ragged breath and reached out for him. Their fingers met at the edge of the sink, and the contact eased Sam. He shut his eyes again and floated back, letting the heat of Mitch's fingers burn the shame away.

That is, until he felt a sharp slap against his ass.

It was Randy's hand, and it came again, and again, until Sam let go of Mitch and turned to glare at him. Randy glared back. "*My* ten minutes," he said, pushed Sam back toward the wall, and fell to his work again.

"Actually," Mitch said lazily, "the time is up."

Sam and Randy groaned in unison, and Mitch laughed.

Randy slapped Sam's ass again, more lightly this time. Then he kissed the dimple at his pelvis. "Okay," he said, his voice shaky. "You two are going to give me five minutes alone."

Mitch's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"Not for that," Randy snapped, and sank back onto the floor, leaning against the wall. He looked very shaken as he ran a hand over his face. "Just to recover. Jesus, Peaches, the noises you make could make a man come in his pants. Please tell me I am fucking you later." Sam, who had been trying to fasten his jeans over a burgeoning erection, faltered. Randy rolled his eyes. "Please tell me I am fucking *somebody* later. Or that someone is fucking me. Or jacking me off. Or sucking me off. Or *something*?"

"I think we can arrange *something*," Mitch drawled, and he took Sam's hand and led him out of the bathroom.

Once the door closed, he drew Sam into his arms, pressed him hard against his own erection, and kissed him, very, very hard.

When they broke away, they were both breathless, and they touched each other with strangely tender caresses given what they had just done and witnessed.

"You only have to say," Mitch reminded him, "and it's over. I still remember your word. And if you can't say it, hold up two fingers."

"I'm okay," Sam said, somewhat reflexively, but as he curled closer to Mitch's chest, he realized, actually, that he was.

The door to the bathroom opened, and Randy appeared, looking agitated and disheveled.

"There's no point in waiting five minutes," he growled. "Can we go home and fuck now?"

"We haven't even made it to the Bellagio," Mitch said with more calm than Sam knew he felt. "Sam would love the fountains."

Randy narrowed his eyes at him and at Sam, looking suspicious. Then, with no warning whatsoever, he reached out and put his hand boldly to Mitch's crotch. Sam gasped in surprise, Mitch winced, and Randy grinned.

"Sure, we can go to the Bellagio," Randy said, and, still smiling, he tightened his grip on Mitch's dick. "And I hope they turn as blue as your goddamned rig, you fucker."

He strode off down the hall, and Sam and Mitch followed, but Sam noticed that despite Randy's sense of victory, Mitch was smiling too. In fact, Sam didn't know that he'd seen him happier.

THEY walked up the street to the Bellagio, Sam gawking at everything along the way until they finally came to the huge, arcing sprays of water of the Bellagio's exterior, and as the water swayed and danced to the music, Sam simply stood there and gaped.

"It's beautiful," he said, and when Mitch put his arm around him, he didn't think twice, just leaned against him, wrapped his arm around his, and settled in to watch.

It was about then that things started to get funny with Randy.

"I'm thirsty," he declared, abruptly. "Let's go to Krave." And before anyone could object or even agree, he grabbed Sam and dragged him back down in the direction from which they'd come.

They had to walk several blocks, and by the time they got there, everyone was thirsty, and Sam was ready to collapse into a booth. But he barely had a sip of his drink before Randy took it from his hand, passed it to Mitch, and dragged Sam out onto the floor.

“Dance with me, baby,” he said, and he pushed Sam deeper into the crowd.

Sam tried to glance back at Mitch, but he couldn’t see him. “Randy—” he said, then gasped as Randy gripped his hips and ground them against his own.

He calmed a little as Sam gave in and swayed a little to the music, something by Beyoncé that he’d never really liked, but despite the fact that he’d been dragged here, not asked, he had to admit it was fun to be out in the middle of so many men, dancing with someone clearly determined to get into his pants.

“Does Mitch ever dance?” he asked as he wrapped his arms around Randy’s neck and let him hook his thumbs in his waistband.

Randy slapped him on the butt. “Will you stop thinking about him for two seconds?” Then he paused, noticing the way Sam had jumped at the slap. “Hmm,” he said, his whole tone changing. “So you like a bit of slap with your tickle, do you?”

Sam wished he’d been able to ingest a little more alcohol. “A little,” he admitted.

“You let Mitch spank you?” he asked.

“I thought we weren’t talking about him,” Sam said.

Randy pressed his hand against the globe of Sam’s ass. “This is spanking. It’s very different. Did you let him?”

Sam nodded, hesitantly. “Twice.”

“And you liked it?”

Sam nodded again.

Randy began to move them to the music again, but this time he nibbled occasionally at Sam’s neck.

“I want to spank you,” he said after awhile.

Sam didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything. But he thought about it. And thinking about it made him hard.

“We’ll ask Mitch,” he said.

Randy nipped his neck again, a little too hard. “It’s your ass, Peaches. You make that decision.”

But Sam shook his head. “I’ll do it, but I’m asking him if he wants me to first.”

"He'll want you to," Randy said.

"I'm still asking him."

They danced a little longer. The song changed, and Sam wanted to go sit down, but Randy wouldn't let him. And once the music started again, Sam didn't want to go either.

"Bananarama *again!*" His hips began to sway of their own accord. "'Look On The Floor'. God, I love this song. I love this whole album."

Randy pulled back a little, looking bemused, but Sam ignored him and began to dance in earnest. He moved out of his arms but didn't go far, because when he got to the chorus, he spun around and pressed his back against Randy, humming along, singing "someone told me this was just a dance" softly as he put Randy's hands on his hips and began to get serious with his boogie.

Randy nuzzled his neck, sliding his hands over his body as he moved along with him.

"Mitch doesn't dance," he said very softly, his lips tickling the flesh of Sam's ear.

"That's too bad," Sam said, arched against him, and snaked his hand up over the back of his head.

"You're not quite as bashful as you were before," Randy said, still teasing his ear as they moved.

"You had your tongue in my ass," Sam pointed out. "It's hard to be shy after that."

"I'd like to have a lot more in your ass," Randy said, and he darted his tongue briefly into Sam's ear.

Sam shuddered and threaded his fingers into his hair. "Maybe. Just… let me take this slow. I've never done it before."

"Peaches, you have had sex before."

"Not with two at once. Not—not fucking. Not all the way." He thought of the twink video, of the double-penetration, and he faltered. He couldn't even let himself think about that.

Not yet.

Randy's hand closed tightly on Sam's hip. "Then how about just you and me?"

Tyke's warning from the bar came back in a rush. *He'll try to scare you or steal you.* Sam pushed out of his arms and turned to face him, arms over his chest.

"No," he said clearly, flatly, and with more emphasis than he'd ever given the word in his life. He could see the rejection cut Randy, which he thought was strange, given that this was just a game. It made him angry. "Does he mean that little to you, that you just have to take everything he has?" Sam asked.

He was ready for Randy to argue, or say something dramatic like, "Quite the opposite," but if anything he went very still, and for a second, Sam did, too, not even aware of the music.

"He has you, does he?" Randy said.

Now Sam did blush. "I didn't mean it like that. I mean—" He looked away, his heart hurting a little. "I have to go back home, before too long. And he knows that. It's just… I'm having a good time. I like him. But I don't know how it would ever work." He felt his chest tighten further, and in a panic, he brushed the thought away. "Look, I need to go get my drink."

But Randy grabbed his arm—gently—and held him there. "I'm sorry," he said, and the sincerity of his words caught Sam.

"It's okay," Sam said, not really sure what he was accepting an apology for, but something told him this didn't happen often with Randy.

"Finish your song?" he said, and Sam nodded, and went back into his arms.

"I do need to get my drink, after," he said, as Randy arranged his arms back around his neck. Sam relaxed into the dance and began to sway again. "I wonder if they'll play Kylie?"

"Do you have a favorite song?" Randy asked, moving with him.

Sam made an affronted sound. "There isn't just one!"

"One you'd like to dance to?" Randy prompted, amused again.

Sam considered this. "If I got to pick anything? 'Made of Glass'. But it's kind of a rarity. They won't have it here."

The song finished, and they went back to the tables, where Mitch was lounging, sipping his beer, and waiting.

"Need to go out for a cigarette?" Randy asked as he slid into his chair. He sounded oddly hopeful to Sam.

"Nope." Mitch reached over to squeeze Sam's knee. "Have fun?"

Sam nodded as he tipped his beer to his lips and took a long drink. "I love dancing," he said.

"I remember," he replied, and Sam smiled, feeling very warm.

Randy rose. "I'll be right back," he said, and disappeared into the crowd again.

Sam watched him go. "Is he okay?"

Mitch watched him too. "Not sure. What'd you two talk about on the floor?" When Sam shuttered, he sighed. "I already know he tried to get you to have sex with him alone, so if that's what has you worried, let it go."

"How—?"

"Because he's Randy." Mitch took his hand and stroked the back of it. "What'd he say?"

Sam ran through the strange exchange that had been most of their conversation before he remembered the part he needed to tell Mitch anyway. "He wants to spank me," he blurted.

He felt a hot kick at the way Mitch's face changed, a shadow passing over it that reminded him of the bathroom at the Paris casino. "And what do you want?"

"I want to know if you mind," Sam said.

Mitch gave him a strange look, and after a brief hesitation, he leaned forward and kissed Sam on his temple. "Sunshine," he said, very gently. "I am never going to care. I don't care who you fuck. Even Randy. You can fuck anybody you want to without me. Just tell me about it, so I know."

"But I don't want to fuck anybody without you," Sam protested, and Mitch just smiled and said, "I know." And Sam looked into his eyes, and Mitch looked back, and for a minute, he forgot that he was in the bar, in Vegas, or even on the planet.

And then, as if from very far away, he heard the music. And his eyes widened, and he gasped.

"Kylie!" he cried.

Randy appeared, looking triumphant. "They didn't have the one you wanted, but they did have 'All I See'. Will that do?"

Sam nodded, and laughed, and Sam turned to him, dropping Mitch's hands. Randy held out his hand, beaming wickedly, and Sam rose, going eagerly to him now that he had things settled with Mitch.

"Want to go have your cigarette now?" Randy asked, but Mitch just shook his head.

"I like to watch." He settled back into his chair.

Randy looked surprised, and he faltered, but Sam just grabbed his hand and dragged him back to the floor. "Come *on!*" he said, "I want to dance!"

THEY did dance, to that song and to the next, and to the next. The music ended after that, and they went back to the table to drink and watch an amateur strip show, which they all enjoyed, Sam especially when Mitch leaned over and said he thought that was a good idea, for later. After that he kept imagining he was the one up there, taking off his clothes for the crowd. It was scary, and he couldn't quite make it work in his head, but it was still fun.

He ended up on Randy's lap at some point, which meant that before long Randy's hands were wandering over him, and after a few more drinks, he tugged at Sam's T-shirt to remove it, and Sam let him. He slipped his hands into Sam's waistband, undid his pants, and soon Sam's T-shirt was a flimsy camouflage for the hand job Randy was giving him right there in the middle of the bar. Sam tipped his head back against Randy's shoulder, watching Mitch watching him be fondled. Mitch's eyes had gone dark again, and Sam realized that soon they would go back to the house and things would get even more interesting. The thought made him harder, and he forgot that people were probably watching, forgot that technically if the bouncer caught them they'd be in big trouble, and he began to make soft, breathy sounds as he closed his eyes and let Randy take him away.

"I'm going to slip out and have a cigarette," Mitch said, "and then we can go."

Sam, much as he was enjoying what was happening to him, wanted to go now. But when he suggested to Randy that they follow him and let him smoke on the way, Randy shook his head.

"'I'm going to have a cigarette' is Mitch code for 'I need to think'. Unless he's driving, he makes sure he does it alone most of the time." Randy traced his tongue along the outside of Sam's ear. "A lot of the time it's because he's nervous. But right now, I think he's just planning."

"Planning?" Sam whispered, his belly flexing as Randy's hand slipped down to cradle his balls.

"What we're going to do with you." Randy's finger slipped lower, teasing at Sam's entrance. "This has all just been a warm up to the big game, Peaches. You're going to be taken home and made the plaything of two men. You ready, baby?"

Sam nodded, thinking if he were more ready he'd blow up. "You—you've done this a lot? Taking home a guy, and sharing him?"

Randy's tongue explored Sam's ear again. "There's a difference between taking home a guy from a bar and someone like you, that we know. A trick is just a fuck. But with you, Sam—shit, honey, we've been fucking you, and each other, all night." His free hand, which had been tracing Sam's nipple, reached up and stroked his hair. "Head games. Jockeying to see who's on top—metaphorically, but I suppose technically too."

"Wh-who won?" Sam asked, letting his legs fall farther open so Randy could reach him better.

Randy's chuckle made his body tingle. "You did, Peaches."

Sam opened his eyes, and he looked up at Randy, frowning. "But I didn't want to win!"

"I know." Randy nipped at his nose. "That's what's throwing the game."

"I just want—" Sam faltered and looked down. "I like… when you guys tell me what to do. When you do things to me."

"Then that's what will happen," Randy said.

"But—"

"Open your legs, Peaches," Randy directed, "and hook them over my knees."

The command in Randy's voice caught at Sam. He gentled and complied. When Randy's finger pressed against his opening, he bit his lip and relaxed as Randy carefully entered him.

"If I had lube," Randy whispered, "I'd push harder into you. I'd fuck you right here, Sam, for everyone to see." Sam gasped, and Randy sucked briefly on his earlobe. "If people asked what I was doing, I'd tell them. I'd ask them if they wanted to watch." His finger pressed just a little deeper. "And you'd lie here, sprawled like a whore, and you'd let them." He kissed Sam's cheek and his jaw with lewd, wet kisses that left his skin damp. "You want that, don't you, Peaches. You want to be my whore. You want to be a whore for Mitch and me together. You want us to use you, all night. You want to start like we did in the bathroom at the Paris and you want it to keep going. You want us to make you feel dirty, don't you, Sam."

Sam, who had been lost since "sprawled like a whore," gasped open-mouthed against Randy's neck and nodded. "Yes," he whispered.

"Then we're going to give it to you." Randy thrust into Sam. "He's coming back now, and we'll go back to the house. Open your eyes, Sam, and look at him, and let him see what you want. He knows where my hand is. Show him how much you like it when he sees you being used."

They were all the right words, all the secrets Sam had written on the darkest parts of his heart, but that only made it all the more terrifying to lift his head, open his eyes, and see Mitch coming toward them. He wanted to be apprehensive, to hold back, to not let him see, but he knew that Mitch wouldn't look at him with lust until he knew Sam was enjoying it too. So he did his best to let go, to do what Randy told him and let him see, let him see what Randy's masturbating did to him, what being seen like this made him feel, to let him see how dirty and depraved he truly wanted to be. And he saw the dark light in Mitch's face, saw his own lust, his own depravity, feeding off Sam's own.

Then Randy's finger stilled and left him, and then his hand was tucking Sam back into his pants and doing up the fly.

They led Sam out together, which was good because he was in a complete sexual coma. He was still without his shirt, which even though plenty of other men in the bar were without one, he didn't normally go around half-dressed, so he felt vulnerable and naked and

therefore even more turned on as they wove their way through the crowd, Mitch in front, Sam in the middle, Randy behind. Sam felt the eyes of others on him sometimes, and he wondered if they knew, if people were sitting at tables and thinking, "those three will go have sex now." He wondered if people cared. He thought about Middleton, or tried to, but his hometown and all the guilt and shame it telegraphed were far away in so many ways. It didn't matter, not now. Nothing mattered. Only this.

The walk up the Strip to their garage was long, and Sam felt even more naked walking shirtless on the street. He let himself be aware of people they passed, saw their judgment, their appreciation, and their indifference. Even when he saw a group of men make faces and mouth "fag" at him, he didn't fear, not with this crowd, and not with Randy and Mitch around him. Especially with Mitch. He worried a little as they went into the garage, worried that the men would follow, but they didn't, and the next thing he knew, Randy was nudging him into the truck. But Randy didn't follow. Instead, he stood at the door, looked at Sam, and said, "Take off your pants."

"Wh-what?" Sam said, stilling halfway across the seat.

"Your pants," Randy repeated. "Your jeans. Take them off. I'm feeling like molesting you on the way home."

The thought of riding through Las Vegas naked while Mitch and Randy fondled him was heady. But his mind raced ahead and found the flaw. "The parking ramp attendant will see. I can't."

"Put your shirt over your crotch," Randy said. He made a hurry-up gesture. "Come on, Peaches."

Sam turned to Mitch, who was looking at him impassively. "I can't," he whispered.

Mitch said nothing.

Randy reached in and took hold of Sam's belt loop.

"Violet!" Sam shouted.

And Mitch's hand came across the seat, staying Randy's. He looked his friend in the eye and said calmly, but very firmly, "That's a no."

Randy blinked, then nodded back. "Good to know." He let go of Sam and slid in beside him. Mitch did too. And then they were pulling out of the parking space and driving down the ramp.

Sam's heart was beating like a hammer at the inside of his chest as Mitch paid the attendant and pulled out onto the street. He hadn't even thought about it, he'd just shouted, and he'd been still reeling from the act itself while they'd been accepting it and ending the little game. Sam felt good but upset too. Were they done? Had he wrecked it? He shifted in his seat, feeling awkward and remorseful.

Randy was watching him. "Is this his first time using the safe word?"

"Just once before," Mitch confessed.

Randy shook his head. "Have you been playing that tame?"

Mitch took a second to answer. "Sam likes a different kind of domination. Some humiliation, yeah, but inside his own head. He doesn't like to see it from other people."

Sam quieted at this, rolling the words around in his mind. They were true. He'd just never thought of it that way before.

But Mitch was talking again. "Though, yeah. Mostly, we've been tame by your standards, Skeet."

Sam turned to him. "You didn't need to be. I—I would have done more. I will too."

Mitch rubbed his chin. Then, with some reluctance, he reached for his cigarettes and lit one before he answered. "I was being tame for me."

"Oh," Sam said, and he felt shame creeping up like a frost.

"No, Peaches. That's my fault." Randy sank back in his seat. "Well, what now?"

Mitch smoked a little and shrugged. "That's up to you."

Randy laughed, a little bitterly, Sam thought. "Please. I'm not in charge. That's been made clear."

They were speaking in some sort of code, and it was driving Sam crazy. "Not to me," he said. "What's going on?"

Mitch said nothing, just continued to smoke. Randy sat quietly at first, but finally swore under his breath. "Fuck. Fine, Peaches, but if you want your five minutes of honesty, you pay for it. I'll swap you your previously mentioned blow job for some answers."

Sam thought it sounded kind of fucked, but he wanted to hear this. Plus, sex would get them out of this weirdness and back to where he wanted to be. “Okay,” he agreed.

Randy sank back into the seat, and he stared out the window as he spoke. “What’s going on,” he said, “is that the last few times Mitch and I did this, it went badly. He started liking the third guys we introduced, and I fucked it up, every time.”

“It wasn’t exactly like that,” Mitch said, flicking his cigarette ash out the window. “I made some of my own mess. And we rigged the outcome by the guys we were picking. They couldn’t handle it, and we knew it.”

“Oh, so you tell me all this now, after I’ve stewed in my own guilt for two years?” Randy shot back.

Mitch shrugged. “You had some of it coming.”

Randy relaxed again, somewhat chagrined. “Fair point.”

This was still confusing, Sam thought, but definitely more interesting. “So what did you guys do to them?”

“Same thing as you,” Randy said. “Took them out, fucked with them, brought them back, fucked them.”

“But what did you do that was weird?” Sam pressed. He turned to Mitch. “Why don’t you want to do it anymore?”

Mitch said nothing, just kept smoking.

“Because if he has to choose,” Randy said very reluctantly and with no small amount of disdain, “he’ll choose ‘emotional connection over kinky sex’. And that’s a direct quote.”

Sam tried to digest this, but it didn’t make sense. He turned back to Mitch. “But—when we met, the first thing you did was fuck me in the back of your trailer!”

Mitch pushed the spent end of the Winston out the window and reached for another one. “I thought you were asking *him* questions.”

“I just want to know whether or not we’re about to blow everything up!” he shot back, panic rising.

“Well, see,” Randy drawled, “You’re a conundrum. You’re both, Peaches. You’re kinky and emotional at once. But how far, both? What will happen to you if we take you too far? Will you hate him? Will you decide you like me better?”

“No,” Sam said, suddenly angry.

Randy sighed. “Yes. But you still might reject him, if he’s the one who takes you too far. And he doesn’t want that.”

“You can shut up anytime, Randy,” Mitch growled.

“Did you ever think, Old Man, that maybe we’d have had less trouble if we’d had this conversation with the others?” Randy replied, just as testy.

“If we’d said half this shit to any of the others, they’d have fucking jumped out of the truck!”

“Yeah,” Randy said, “and what does that tell you?”

“Do I need to be here for this conversation?” Sam asked.

“You *are* this conversation,” Randy said. He glanced at the clock on the dash. “You have one more minute of truth. Use it wisely, Peaches.”

Sam turned to Mitch. “Do you want to forget this? Do you want to call it off? Because I don’t want to do this if you don’t want to.”

He glared at Sam. “So you’re going to ask *me* all the questions and give *him* the blow job?”

“Please, Mitch,” Sam said, almost a whisper.

Mitch drew hard on his cigarette and tossed an angry look at Randy. “You want to answer this one for me too?”

“Sure,” Randy said, but there was no malice in his tone. “He wants this, Sam. He wants this so much it scares him. But mostly he wants you.” He sighed. “He needs this, the three of us tonight, more than either you or I want this. And it scares him to death.”

They were pulling into the drive of the house. Sam stared at Mitch while he put the truck in park and turned the ignition off. He waited until Mitch turned to look at him. “Is that true?”

Do you really want me, like that? Do you need this, with me, like I need this with you?

Mitch stared back at him, his poker face down, his expression as naked as it had been that night of the storm. “Yes.”

Sam’s heart swelled, and he took Mitch’s hand.

“I need it too,” he said.

“You two,” Randy said from behind him, “make me ill.”

No we don't, Sam thought. *We make you jealous.* But then he thought of how little time he had left with Mitch, and he found he was jealous too. He wanted more. He wanted this to go on forever. But maybe that was part of the magic. Maybe it was only like this because it was so brief.

Would it make a difference if they didn't do this? Would it change him in the way Randy hinted if he did? Would it just be more kinky sex? Would he be more or less able to stay with Mitch if he did this? Was this that important? Or was it just sex?

He realized the only way to know was to do it and find out. He turned to Mitch and touched his cheek.

"I want you to stop holding back," he whispered. "I want you to show me what you want to do to me. I want you to look at me like you did in that bathroom. I want to be your object—for the game. I want to be there because I feel safe with you." He turned to Randy. "And with you." He looked at Mitch again. "But I want you to show me everything you want. I want to feel it raw and almost scary. I promise to tell you if it's too far—*before* it goes too far."

Mitch bent down and kissed him gently. Then he looked Sam in the eye and said, "Take out Randy's cock and put it in your mouth."

Sam turned on the seat, eyes down, until he saw Randy's waist. He eyed the bulge there, small, but growing. He reached for it, glancing up at Randy, but Randy was just watching, his eyes dark, and eager, but also patient. Sam undid the fastening and pulled down the zipper. He tugged Randy's underwear down and watched his cock spring up. He stared down at it, thinking about how it would taste, about how they would both watch him do this. About how Mitch had ordered him to do this.

About how Mitch wanted him to do this. About how *he* wanted to do this.

Sam bent down and took Randy's cock into his mouth.

It was still a little soft, but not for long, not with Sam's lips around it, not when it slid a few times to the back of Sam's throat. Sam shut his eyes and sank into his task, licking, sucking, bobbing, loving the soft-hardness of it, loving the feel of it on his tongue, between his lips, loving the tiny bits of pre-cum that he caught from the tip. He wormed his tongue inside that hole, carefully. He swirled the tip, took

him deep, deeper, made a soft sound, and fucked himself on Randy's shaft. He fucked his own mouth for his pleasure and for theirs. He felt their hands on him as if from a distance, stroking his back, his arms, his hair, and he felt Mitch sliding his knee between his legs, unbuttoning him, taking him into his hand and stroking him idly, as if he had all night to play at this.

Randy ended it, a little abruptly, lifting Sam's head by his hair. "Slow down, Peaches," he rasped. "Or you'll get the Bellagio fountain all over again."

"I want you to come in my mouth," Sam whispered, and dived for him again.

Randy kept him away. "Yes, eager little slut, but I want to come on your face, and in your hair. And not yet. I'm not as young as you are, and I need to pace myself."

Sam let his head rest on his thigh, clutching at the seat as Mitch continued to stroke him. "Can we go inside?" He sounded as if he was begging. He was. "Please?"

"What do you want to do inside?" Mitch asked, his voice bored, and low, and wicked.

"I want you to fuck me," Sam whispered. "I want you to make me do things for each other. I want you to watch me. I want you to do all kinds of things to me. Together."

Mitch's hand tightened briefly on Sam's cock. "What do you think, Skeet?"

"I think we need to take this boy inside and fuck him," Randy replied.

Sam shivered, and Mitch let go of his cock to slap his ass. "Get inside, Sunshine, and we'll play."

Chapter 12

THEY began in the living room by having Sam undress.

Mitch made the suggestion, but Randy gave the directions, and Sam stood in the center of the room between them, eyes moving back and forth between their faces as he undid his jeans, pushed them down—"slowly, move more slowly, Peaches"—stepped out of them, stood, naked but for his underwear, and let them look at him. He raised his hands as Randy told him to, turned—slowly—then came forward, hands behind his head, and let Randy run his hands over his body. Randy made murmurs of appreciation, telling Mitch what he liked, stroking Sam's belly, his thighs, and his backside.

"Off with these," Randy said, snapping Sam's waistband. "Then bend over my knee so I can play with your ass."

Sam fumbled a little as he stepped out of his underwear, but he did it, and tried to lean over Randy's legs, his cock humming in anticipation. But as he began to kneel, Randy's hand slapped him smartly on his bare behind.

"The other way, please, so Mitch can see your finer attributes," Randy said, and Sam went around the other way, bracing his hands against the floor, and this time when he bent over, his ass was aimed at Mitch.

Randy skimmed his hand over the bare globes of flesh. "Very lovely. Very sweet." He reached around with his other hand and pushed them both together before separating them, letting Sam feel the air on his anus. "Also lovely. Clench for me, Sam. Let me see your little pucker say hello." Sam swallowed and did it. "Very nice," Randy said,

his voice silky, praising him as if he were a child doing a good lesson. "Now spread your legs wider, and do it again."

Sam did, and Randy pulled his cheeks wider at the same time. Sam flexed the muscles of his ass, feeling strange, and dirty, and aroused. They were looking at him, inspecting him. Thinking about fucking him.

"Mmm," Randy said. "What do you think, Old Man?"

"Looks good to me," Mitch said, his voice husky.

"Come and take a sample," Randy said, and Sam braced, eager for what was to come.

It was different, like this. Mitch had eaten him out before, but not while someone else held him open, not while Sam leaned over someone else's knees, spreading his legs open on command. And Mitch had never been this slow, this maddening as he ran his tongue up and down him, sometimes sliding over to lick Randy's fingers too. Randy pulled Sam tauter, forcing him open, pulling him almost to the point of pain, and then Mitch began to enter him, slick and soft and wet, and Sam groaned and opened even farther, surrendering to them.

Randy was harsher than Mitch. Randy liked to talk, and while Mitch tongue-fucked him, Randy talked about Sam's hole, and how he wanted to fuck it, and how he liked the way he clenched, how he liked the way Sam looked all spread open. He talked about the toys he'd like to use on him, about how he'd like to tie him down on a bench, spread his legs wide and spank him with a paddle with a dildo rammed deep inside him, fucking him with every blow. His words were sharp, and hard, and some of them were scary, and more than Sam wanted. But they were just words, he realized. That was Randy. He liked to fuck your head as much as your body. He found the edges in your mind, and tried to send you over them.

Mitch, however, was all about Sam's body. He said very little, at first because his mouth was fairly busy, but even when he went away and came back with lube, fucking him first with fingers and next with a series of dildos—Randy describing them in graphic detail, threatening to stuff one into his mouth because it looked so good with a cock inside—Mitch still remained silent, using Sam's orifice as a sort of sensory laboratory. What did this dildo do? How did it look? What noises did Sam make when he fucked him with it, or held it deep inside him, or teased him with the tip? And all the while Randy ran his

commentary on what he saw and how he'd like to see things improved. Sometimes Mitch took his suggestions. Sometimes he didn't. They were a fitting team, in a way: both objectified Sam, but in complementary ways. And through it all, Sam remained, pliant, spread, and open for their use, and in that space between them, he found a strange, erotic peace.

When he complained that his arms were starting to hurt, they stopped, pulling him upright. Mitch arranged Sam against Randy, arms around his shoulders, bent slightly while Mitch played with his ass a little longer. He was using large dildos now, and Sam grunted and huffed as they went inside him. When he'd taken the largest, and when Randy had complimented him on how nice he looked stuffed and spread by the large black cock, Mitch pulled him back, leading Sam to the bedroom with the dildo still deep inside him. He whispered something to Randy as he helped Sam down onto the bed, and Randy nodded and left the room. Sam lay back on his back, bending his legs and arching his hips as Mitch lay down beside him and began to thrust the dildo inside him again.

"I want to watch Randy fuck you," he whispered.

Sam blinked, rising out of his fog. He looked up at Mitch, who was watching him carefully. He was waiting for Sam to say it was okay, Sam knew, but Sam wasn't sure yet that it was.

"I want it," he said, but there was hesitation in his voice. "I—" He shut his eyes and arched into what Mitch was still doing to him below. "I don't—I don't want you upset. I don't want you to think I'm choosing him over you." He reached down and stayed Mitch's hand, feeling awkward enough without being fucked while he confessed his insecurities. "I know it sounds stupid when I've let him do so much else. I don't know why this is different. But it is. Or it feels like it. But I really don't know, honestly." He caught Mitch's wrist and squeezed it. "What's too far for you?"

Mitch put the dildo aside. He thought a minute, stroking Sam's belly while he did so.

"Kissing," he said, at last. His eyes met Sam's bashfully. "I'm funny about kissing."

Sam blinked. "Seriously?"

Mitch nodded. "That's all, just kissing. You could fuck six men in a row and let me watch or not, and I wouldn't care. To be honest, it really turns me on. I don't know why. Probably some twisted power thing: if you fuck somebody and come back to me, I must be pretty good. But it's just hot too. I like to watch the way you move when another man touches you. You look so vulnerable, and so hot, and then, when you get nervous, you look at me. Not them—me. I worried with Randy that it would be different, that he'd charm you away, but if anything, you've charmed him."

He was still stroking Sam's stomach, and between that touch and his words, Sam felt very soft, and safe. He thought of what Mitch had said, about kissing, and he realized that Mitch had avoided kisses mostly with him for a long time, but suddenly, they'd been nearly constant. But not in public, not often, and never much when others could see. Kisses were private. Kisses were *theirs*. It was oddly charming, and Sam realized he liked it.

"Did I kiss the man in Denver?" Sam asked, trying to remember.

"You didn't know," Mitch said, "and it's kind of a strange thing to be fussy about, so it doesn't matter."

Sam felt crestfallen. "So I *did* kiss him."

Mitch's fingers skimmed low on Sam's belly. "Actually, you didn't."

Sam let out a breath of relief. "I won't," he promised. "Ever."

Their eyes met, and their inevitable parting cut across them both like a knife.

Mitch kissed his forehead. "Not now, Sunshine. Don't think about that now."

"I won't kiss Randy," he whispered.

"He won't try," Mitch assured him.

And Sam realized the import of what had happened when, upon their arrival, Randy had tried with Mitch.

Sam looked up at him.

"I want him to fuck me," he said, his voice shaking, "but I want you to watch. And I want you to touch me, sometimes, while he does."

Mitch tipped his head back, bent down, and kissed him, gently at first, then deeper, and deeper still, his tongue stealing into Sam's

mouth, luring Sam's into his own. The kiss was more powerful now that Sam knew what it meant to Mitch, and he sank into the mattress, opening not just his mouth but his heart and his soul, feeling like a lotus that just kept opening and opening and opening.

When Mitch rose, Sam lay there, sated and soft, but when he left, Sam knew what he was going to do, and he tensed a little, feeling like a virgin laid out for sacrifice. When Randy came into the room with Mitch close behind, the feeling intensified, but it began to turn him on as well, especially as Randy shed his clothes and knelt, naked, before him.

He lifted his legs for Randy, opening himself, inviting the other man in. He watched as Randy put the condom on himself and smeared himself with lube. He forced himself to relax as Randy probed him, first with one lube-slick finger and next with two. Then he fucked him with them, not roughly, but not sweetly, either. Sam looked into Randy's eyes, thinking about what was about to happen, about what he was letting happen to him. He saw the darkness, the hard lust in Randy's expression, and he loved it, but he feared it too.

When Randy pushed against him, Sam turned his head and looked at Mitch. He was on the edge of the mattress, leaning on one arm and one hip, and his eyes were trained on the juncture of Sam's thighs, where his friend was entering his lover. *That's what I am,* Sam realized. *His lover. Mitch's lover.* And this was Mitch's secret desire: to watch his lover be fucked by someone else. That was his edge, his danger. And Sam was giving it to him. As Randy pushed his legs up against his chest and thrust inside of Sam, Sam reached over and touched Mitch's hand. Mitch lifted it, not breaking his gaze, and kissed Sam's fingers and sucked them briefly into his mouth, matching the pulse of Randy's increasing thrusts.

Randy was rough, but he was smooth, too, lulling Sam into a strange sort of trance, and soon Sam was begging Randy to fuck him harder, to please move faster, and he became simply incoherent as Randy ignored him and did as he liked, rolling his hips, withdrawing, pushing deep, raking against Sam's prostate with the same ruthless madness that he lived his life, until Sam was just as mad and raw with his own wanting. And just as Sam was almost there, just when he was sliding over the edge, Randy pulled out, whipped off the condom, and came all over Sam's chest.

Sam watched the semen spray against his skin, felt a few sprays hit his chin, his cheek, and his mouth. He looked up at Randy, dazed, lost, and still so horny he thought he would explode. Randy smiled at him, looking very pleased, and very proud of himself. Then he glanced at Mitch. His expression darkened, his smile widened, and the next thing Sam knew, Randy was moving away.

Before Sam could even cry out in protest, he felt someone grab his hip, and the next thing he knew, he was turned over roughly onto his stomach, and before he could so much as draw a breath, his hips were grabbed again, this time with both hands, and roughly raised. When he tried to adjust himself, he felt a sharp, strong slap on his ass, and then another. Sam gasped and held still, his arms braced against the mattress, his head down, his eyes wide open and staring back between his opened legs. He saw Mitch's jean-clad knees there, and he whimpered as he saw him peel them back, freeing his cock to place a condom on it. Then he felt Mitch brace against his hips as he entered him, wrapping his arms around Sam's waist and torso as he'd done so many times before, and Sam braced his arms and opened himself as he waited for what he knew was to come.

Mitch had never fucked him this hard. He had never made these kinds of sounds, like he was an animal, never had so little finesse that he was nothing more than rutting inside Sam. It was so possessive, so total, so incredibly arousing that Sam could only spiral up a short spike. He screamed into the mattress and came in a hot, almost adolescent spurt against the tangled sheets. Mitch thrust on, and Sam *bit* the mattress now, too sensitive to take this but too enthralled to make it stop, and then Mitch pulled out too. Sam shuddered into the mattress as he felt hot cum spray across his back. He felt Mitch's cock tap his ass, and he felt the soft, weary slap of his hand. Sam held himself still, spinning from it all.

"Jesus," he heard Randy whisper from somewhere far away.

Mitch sank onto the mattress beside him, pulling Sam against his body with a tenderness all the more stark for how roughly he'd just used him. Sam opened his eyes and smiled, wearily, as Randy came and to lie on the other side beside him.

He was coated in semen: Mitch's, Randy's, and his own. He was sore. He was exhausted. And as the three of them snuggled together

into a quiet embrace, he realized he had never felt so sated or so safe in his life.

THERE was a great deal of sex the next few days.

Randy called in sick to the distributing plant and arranged for someone else to cover his run to Reno on the day after that. He had the weekend off already, he told them, but couldn't get out of anything past that. Mitch pointed out that by then they'd need to be heading east.

"We'd best get started then," Randy said. And they did.

They were gentle with Sam that next day, the morning especially—at least, they were kind to the insides of his ass. Randy was liberal with his massaging of the outside as he took Sam on a private tour of his kinkiest toys, some of which Sam recognized from the catalog at the Denver shop. Sam dismissed a great deal of them, but he was intrigued by the sex swing, and he fell completely silent at the spreaders and the paddles.

They did a lot of role-play, but also just some general goofing around. Sam's favorite was when Mitch hooked up his iPhone and fucked him to the entire repertoire of Kylie's Favorites: the *very* best had been when they'd dressed him in a cowboy hat, boots, and nothing else, and had him take turns riding them while "Cowboy Style" played seductively on repeat. They had him wear an apron and fondled him while he served them. They blindfolded him and tied him to the bed, taking turns touching him, trying to get him to guess who it was, trying to trick him. Sometimes he got it right, but sometimes he couldn't tell.

They lingered in the house a lot. Randy cooked, and Mitch lounged, his fingers curled in Sam's hair as he surfed through the television channels. They ate, and they talked, about music, about where Sam and Mitch had been traveling, and Randy's adventures. They were careful not to talk about the future.

One night, after dinner, Randy introduced Sam to a spreader.

He began by bringing out wine and suggesting Sam take off all his clothes, because he felt like taking him to his room and giving him a good hard spanking. Sam had agreed readily, but once there, he'd balked, because waiting at the foot of the bed was a bench, and beside

it were several cuffs, and a crop, and a long metal bar with closures on each end.

Sam almost bailed, and he probably would have, but Mitch had come into the room after him and was leaning against the door, watching. He looked lazy, but Sam knew he was there to reassure Sam, to let him know that this could stop anytime, but also that if he chose to go forward, Mitch would be here to make sure he was safe.

And it was enough. Nervous, Sam let Randy bend him over the bench, let him bind his hands beneath it, but he clenched his fists as Randy fitted his ankles into the spreader. It felt strange to not be able to close his legs, and for the first few seconds, he felt panicked, and almost called out for the game to stop. But when Randy's hand slid down between his open cheeks, his touch gentle and masterful all at once, just like that, Sam went pliant and waited for what was to come.

It was, surprisingly, not bad.

It was nerve-racking at first, because he couldn't move, couldn't close his legs, couldn't even shift his position, but once they started touching him, he realized it was just like every other time with them had been, except this time his submissiveness was decided for him. They touched him, they probed him, and they talked about him, and Sam shut his eyes and lay there, letting it happen.

They blindfolded him, and that was the only time Sam spoke up, to say, nervously, that he didn't want a gag, but Randy just stroked his cheek and promised to give him other things to do with his mouth.

It should have been scary. It should have felt like too much, too far, and probably for a lot of people, Sam acknowledged, it would be. But kneeling at that bench, spread, trussed, and blind, Sam found not just pleasure but a strange sort of Zen. What was there to be embarrassed about now? After this, what could make him blush? After letting himself become so helpless, what was there to fear?

He welcomed them both into his body, not always knowing who they were, though sometimes he could tell by the tenor of a touch or by technique who was inside him, who was stroking him. Mostly, though, they blended together. They spanked him with hands and paddles. They nudged him open and filled him with God only knew what: toys large and small, vibrating and still, ridged and smooth. At one point, Sam did have a tail after all, and even in his sexual euphoria, he laughed.

They put themselves inside him, too, first one at a time and then together, and when he finally came, it was with a cock in his mouth and another in his ass. He had become, he realized with quiet pleasure, his very own *Twink Kink*, though at no point had he been unwilling in his capture.

On another night, Sam got to see Mitch and Randy in action with each other.

"When the two of you were dating," he asked, "who fucked who?"

Their embarrassed, awkward reaction was almost more fun than their answers. "We didn't date; we fucked," Mitch said as Randy added, "That was always the problem."

"What was the problem?" Sam pressed. "Who fucked who?"

"Why do you think we had to go and get a third?" Randy said, almost snarling.

But this had led to stories of their myriad sexual adventures over the years, and as they all became aroused, Sam was possessed of a wicked idea.

"Let me see you do each other," he said.

They had balked and made excuses, but Sam had pleaded, and eventually seduced them, drawing them together and sucking first one and then the other, kissing their stomachs and their chests, whispering how much he wanted to see them do it, of how hot it would make him if they did, and before long he had Mitch on his knees, Randy arranging himself behind him.

He understood, as he watched, what they had meant by saying it didn't work. They were the same ends of a magnet, neither one wanting to give. Both complained they hadn't done this in a long time and to take it slow. Both seemed more nervous at the prospect of being entered by the other than any reservations Sam had exhibited. But each wanted to do the other, very badly, and they dueled all the way to the end, each trying to have the fuck go their way, each trying to direct the other and the other angry at being directed. In the end, neither of them came, and Sam collapsed onto the mattress, laughing.

"Okay," he said, holding up his hands. "I won't ever ask you to do that again."

Randy, who had been on his back cursing that Mitch was plowing him, sighed in relief and moved away. "Thank God." He pulled the sheet over himself, looking sullen. "I don't know how you stand that, Peaches, giving or receiving with that bastard."

"I've never given," Sam said, smiling as he watched their awkward recoveries.

Randy lifted an eyebrow at him. "You mean with Mitch, or ever?"

"Ever," Sam confessed.

And the game changed.

He didn't know why he was nervous about fucking them, but he was. He wasn't sure he could manage both, but they were as eager to watch him as he had been them, and for all their hesitation at bottoming for each other, they were surprisingly eager to do so for him. They were unfazed when Sam fumbled with the condom, having never put one on himself, and they helped him. Randy was almost playful as he lay back, patient as Sam fumbled before easing inside him, enjoying Mitch's help and whispered encouragement. Once he got over feeling awkward, Sam enjoyed it too. He felt oddly powerful, almost heady with his discovery, and soon he had Randy breathing fast along with him and clutching at the sheets. But Randy cut him off before either of them finished, saying that he wanted to see the flip side too.

It was different with Mitch. Mitch flatly refused to be on his back, and Sam was almost glad, because he didn't think he could do it if he had to look at Mitch's face. He wasn't sure he could at all, at first, which made him even more awkward, because he thought it was probably some fucked up head thing, and he retreated so much that Mitch had to sit up and reassure him.

"You were beautiful with Randy, Sunshine," he said, stroking his face. "It's okay."

"I just feel silly," Sam said, tucking his chin down. "I'm sorry."

"You'll feel better for having done it," Randy said, and he nudged Sam back to his knees. "Come on. Think of how good it will feel for Mitch."

And Randy was right. It *was* good, once he did it. As soon as he felt Mitch begin to respond, it felt even more powerful than with Randy, and because it was Mitch, it felt like a sort of circle closing too.

He lost himself in his thrusts, feeling braver with Mitch than he'd ever been, and to his surprise, he even came. Still riding the high of his new experience, he lay back and jerked the others off, but as they drifted into sleep, he lay awake, staring up at the ceiling—the smell of sex and man all around him—thinking. And the next day, as they touched and joked in the shower and the kitchen, and as they dressed to go out, finally cajoling Sam into his sexy jeans (complete with the leather thong Mitch had bought him in Denver), he realized that he was thinking of them differently too. He had been inside them. Somehow that made everything different.

He was so used to being the one others were inside that he never thought about what it felt to go the other way, and though he kept it to himself because it seemed so touchy-feely, he realized that this extended to more than sex. As they led him up and down the Strip, as they took him back to the Watering Hole and shocked everyone by the fact that not just Mitch and Randy but the *three* of them were still together, as they teased him, coaxed him, and seduced him, Sam realized that he had affected them in the same way they had affected him. They were all inside of one another.

And soon it would all end.

On Saturday, Mitch announced he had a load arranged for Chicago, heading out on Monday. They'd go to the distribution yard with Randy in the morning, do an inspection on Old Blue and get her loaded, and they'd be gone by noon. The announcement put something of a pallor on their evening, and they lingered at the house, ordering pizza, watching movies, and going to bed without anyone even suggesting sex. They did, however, all go to bed together.

On Sunday, they went to Zion.

To Sam's complete surprise, they went on motorcycles. There was a pair of them in the garage, and in days past, apparently, Mitch and Randy had driven them everywhere. And on Sunday, they took Sam too. He clutched Mitch's back and huddled inside his helmet against the wind as they rode out of Vegas and across the desert, all the way into Utah, to Zion National Park, which Sam discovered was a dazzling array of rock and tunnel and vistas that took his breath away. As the sun streaked over the mountains, Sam stood at the top of a multi-colored ridge, for once heedless of the edge, rendered speechless by the silent, brilliant, almost alien beauty before him.

Mitch came up beside him, and without a word, handed him a small plastic bag.

"What's that?" Randy asked, watching as Sam unzipped it.

"My mother," Sam replied, taking some of the ash between his fingers and letting it go. He watched the gray dust drift down, then upended the whole of it that they'd brought along, letting the cascade filter down into the valley below. Mitch, who had placed his hand on Sam's back, stroked him gently, then turned and walked away.

"I didn't know your mother was dead," Randy said more gently than usual.

Sam nodded. "Three years ago."

"Good mom?" Randy asked.

"Yes," Sam said, feeling more vulnerable than usual as he spoke about his mother. "I miss her."

"I'll miss you," Randy said, and to Sam's surprise, took his hand.

They were subdued as they came back into Vegas, as they poked around a late dinner and made awkward conversation. It wasn't the way Sam wanted to end this, whatever it was. And after some wine, he found the courage to ask for one more thing, one more adventure from them.

"I want you both to fuck me," he said as Randy cleared away the dishes. He took a deep breath and added, "at once."

Randy dropped a dish in the sink, and Mitch went very still. Sam just waited to hear what they had to say.

Randy leaned against the sink and looked at Mitch. "Well," he said, a little unsteadily. "It's been awhile for that one."

"You have to be careful with that," Mitch said quietly, but Sam could see his eagerness too. "We have to take our time. And if it hurts, you have to stop, Sunshine."

Sam nodded. "I want to do it," he said, his confidence growing now that he'd gotten the worst out of the way. "I want to do it with the two of you."

It was more difficult than Sam had anticipated—much more so, and it almost didn't work. It took them an hour to prep him, with dildos and fingers and a dictionary full of dirty talk, and another fifteen minutes to sort out the position, which ended up being Randy on his

back, Sam crouched over top of him, and Mitch driving the entire business from behind. As they fumbled, Sam began to feel awkward, and he wished he hadn't brought it up and left this just an unattainable fantasy. And then Mitch pushed him forward, caught his and Randy's cocks together and carefully pushed them inside. Sam's breath caught, his eyes rolled backward, and his whole world changed.

It wasn't just that what penetrated him was large. It wasn't even that it was two cocks. It was that it was Mitch, and that it was Randy, and that this was the last time with the two of them, and that it was the beginning of the end. Mitch had to be in Chicago by Wednesday, which meant two days of hard driving. Two days—that was all. So little left, after so long, and though he didn't regret anything they'd done, not even the fights, it suddenly all felt squandered, as if only now he was truly aware of how precious it all had been. Ten days. He'd been gone from Iowa ten days, but he felt like it had been a lifetime. Ten days ago he had been miserable and angry and lost. Now here he was, on his hands and knees, body buckling as two men who loved him, and whom he loved back, each in different ways, pushed their way inside him.

And he let go. As they found their rhythm, as each of them got lost in the erotic connection they had made, Sam let go like he never had before and suspected he never would again. He was aware of nothing—not the sounds he made or the way he moved or what he asked them for in incoherent, sexually charged tongue, but only how they moved inside him, how they touched him, Mitch gripping his hips, Randy sliding his hands up his chest. He gave himself to them, completely, with no guilt, no shame, no reservation, and in that surrender he found—like a quiet, shining pearl he had never known existed—himself.

He was Sam. He was Sunshine. He was Peaches. He was a hot twink fucked by two men at once. He was a male nursing student. He was gay. He was his mother's son. He was a fatherless boy. He was his aunt and uncle's awkward yoke to bear. He was Emma's friend. He was everything, simply, and with no more complications.

He was, as they fucked him, the boy who liked to suck cock in the school bathroom. He was the boy who liked comic books, especially stories with slight boys and men who did well because of their cleverness or their kindness. He was the boy who liked music. He was the boy who fucked delivery men in the alley while he was supposed to

be working. He was the boy who ran away. He was the boy who fucked two men at once. He was the boy who had been ogled and appreciated and sneered at and envied and seduced all the way across the mountains. He was smart, and he was a fool. He was handsome, and he was awkward too. He was kind, and he was cruel. He was an angel, and he was a whore. He was all these things, because they were him, and they were who he was.

And as the two men fucked him, aroused by his body, his cries, his offering, his self, he realized that, actually, it was all just fine.

He laughed, a deep, lusty, powerful sound that drew him out of that strange space and back into his body, where he wrapped himself inside the power and rode them as hard as they rode him, and when his orgasm filled him, he cried out, half-bark, half-roar, and he came, bucking and shouting, across Randy's chest. Then Randy came, and like a string of dominos, Mitch came just after. Then he pulled them both out of Sam and drew them all down to the mattress together, where they tangled, one more time, in an indistinguishable nest of bodies, gasping.

"Fuck," Randy whispered, when he was able.

Mitch grunted his agreement, and Sam just smiled, resting in their arms as his body happily throbbed between them.

IT FELT stranger than Sam thought it would to leave Las Vegas.

It was odd enough to get into Randy's truck before noon, let alone to be heading with Mitch and Randy to what was work in one way or another for both of them. It was awkward to no longer be their third but just a third wheel again as Randy checked in and Mitch checked Blue over. Sam ended up sitting in a dingy lounge near the repair garage, surfing through his iPhone, where, finally, he started dealing with the reality of going home.

He texted Emma to let her know he would be home sometime on Wednesday, but that he'd call her some time on Thursday, unless things went really bad with his aunt and uncle and he needed a place to stay for the night. He emailed his aunt and uncle and told them he was coming home, too, and told them he wanted to talk with them about where they had left things, and where they would go from here. He had

no idea what those answers were, but he figured he had 1,500 miles to figure that out.

He texted Darin and told him to get over himself, because he was done with pizza boxes forever. He didn't text Keith—he wanted to ignore that bastard in person.

He called his advisor at college and asked her some questions, and he called the financial aid office and asked them a few more. He did a search on Craigslist for jobs. He found a few that surprised him, and while he didn't call any of the numbers, he made some notes and emailed them to himself. Returning to Craigslist, he looked for apartments in Middleton, cringing at the prices, but he looked at them anyway, really looked at them. Then he got out a pen and paper and made some lists, of what he owed, of what he had, and what he could get rid of.

Then, with all this swimming in his head, he played Sheep Launcher until Randy came and asked him if he wanted to go to lunch.

"Where's Mitch?" he asked, shouldering his pack and tucking his phone away.

"Supervising the load. He said he'd try to catch up." Randy nodded at a building across the road. "Mexican sound okay?"

Sam thought of Los Dos Amigos, and what he realized had been a first date, so long ago. He let out a heavy breath and nodded.

The food was not even close to as good as Los Dos, but it was hot, and it was food. Of course, Sam wasn't really hungry at all.

"You doing okay?" Randy asked, and Sam nodded.

"Just… it's weird, to be going."

Randy wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned back in his chair. "I'll tell you, I never thought I'd be sitting here with you now like this, that day I met you." Randy's smile was wicked, but wry. "I was trying so hard to get rid of you."

Sam let out a shaky breath and nodded at the clock on the wall. "Well, give me another hour."

"That's the trouble. Now, I want you to stay." Randy leaned forward and squeezed Sam's hand. "Thank you, Sam."

"For what?" Sam asked, not expecting this.

"Bringing Mitch here. He wouldn't have come, otherwise. Or, if he had, he'd have ignored me again. You were like our big do-over, and I'd like to say we got it right because we're older and wiser, but I really think we got it right because it was you." He picked up Sam's hand and kissed it. "So, thank you, for giving me back my best friend."

Sam took his hand back and poked at his taco. "So it will be old times, huh, when he comes back to town? The two of you, partying?" He poked the taco so hard he made a hole. "The three of you?"

Randy laughed. "You honestly think after all this, after everything I *just said*, that he's just going to go out and find another Sam? Because that's the bar now, you know. *You*." He kicked him lightly under the table. "I know you're young, but don't be an idiot, Sam. Don't let him go."

"Randy, don't," he whispered, and he pushed his tray away.

"I haven't been around quite as many blocks as Mitch, but I've been around enough to know the real thing when I see it. Do not fuck this up."

"It's not that." Sam felt sick, and he wished he hadn't eaten anything. "I just—I need—" He rubbed at his face with his hands and slid his fingers into his hair. "I can't describe it. Please, Randy, just let it go."

Randy sighed and pushed an envelope across the table. "Here. My number's in there, too, and my e-mail, and my address, and the whole lot. Call if you need anything from Uncle Randy. Or if you're ever in Vegas and you need somewhere to stay, or if you need a fuck, just say the word."

Sam opened the envelope and looked up accusingly at Randy. "What the fuck is this?"

"Your two hundred," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Every penny earned."

Sam fingered through the bills. "There's more here than two hundred."

"Have to take care of the college boy," Randy said, smiled, and nudged Sam's tray back at him. "Go on. Eat. Milk that youthful metabolism while you can."

Sam did eat, most of it anyway, and when Mitch never did turn up they took takeout to him. Sam snagged a few bottles of Bohemia for

him for later too. They found Mitch sitting in the cab of Old Blue, charts spread out over his lap and his cell phone in his hand.

"Sunshine," he said, distracted as he saw them walk up, "can I borrow your phone? I need to check something, and the net is down."

Sam handed it to him, then turned to Randy. He realized this was goodbye, right now, and that he didn't know what to say. Randy smiled, a rueful, Randy smile, and took him warmly in his arms.

"Goodbye, Peaches," he said, and he kissed Sam gently on the cheek. Turning to Mitch, he slapped him on the leg, and when Mitch didn't pay attention, he slugged him in the arm.

"Hey." Mitch glared down at him.

"I'm heading back to work, Old Man," Randy called up to him. "Am I going to hear from you in less than two years this time?"

Mitch put his clipboard and Sam's phone down, then hopped out of the truck. He regarded Randy gruffly for a second, then seemed to surrender something internal and simply took the other man in his arms.

"I'll call you," he promised.

"You'd better," Randy said, and in unison, they kissed one another on the cheek.

Randy squeezed Sam's hand and gave him one last smile, and then he was gone.

In another twenty minutes, Sam and Mitch were too.

Sam set the iPhone up to play music and settled back in his seat, tucking his feet on the cushion and hugging his knees to his chest, watching the desert expand before him again. They took the same road that they had to Zion, but it was different from a rig, and where they would have turned off to go to the park, they stayed on the interstate, instead.

Utah was quietly, desolately beautiful, but Sam found he didn't like it overall. He missed trees. Even when they entered national forests again, even as he began to see grass and scruff here and there, he thought of the fat, leafy trees of Iowa, and the green cornfields and pastures, and even the well-manicured lawns of Cherry Hill Estates, and he missed them. Utah was beautiful, but it was someone else's beautiful. Even so, when Mitch stopped at a scenic overlook for him to

get a better view, Sam took out more of his mother's ashes and scattered them, because she would have liked it.

They drove all the way through Utah that day into Colorado, into the western plains, stopping for the night in Grand Junction. Mitch checked fluids again, and refueled, and took quite a bit of time with the brakes. Then he took Sam inside to the truck stop restaurant, and they ate, not exactly in silence, but not exactly conversing, either. In the truck Sam surprised him with the Bohemia, which he accepted with a smile and a kiss, and settled Sam beside him on the bed as he surfed mindlessly through the satellite television, never really landing on anything at all.

They made quiet, achingly tender love and slept in one another's arms. But once again, when Sam woke in the morning, they were already on the road.

Mitch was more talkative the next day, pointing out landmarks and interesting things about the land they passed, particularly when they went through Glenwood Canyon. He pointed out the natural hot springs there to Sam and lamented that they wouldn't have time to enjoy them. He told Sam about the Eisenhower Tunnel, and had him look up Loveland Pass on the map, and did his best to illustrate what a wonder and boon the tunnel was. He explained the engineering of 1-70 through the mountains, of how it was the last of the interstate completed, and how hard they had worked not to disrupt the landscape while they laid it.

"You like Colorado, don't you," Sam said after one of the stories.

Mitch shrugged. "I like a lot of places. We live in this huge country with so many climates, so many different cultures, so much different everything. I've been driving it over ten years and I haven't seen it all, not even close. I wish I could get gigs in some of the more out of the way areas, but I don't have networks there yet. I suppose I should just go and make them. I know I'll die not seeing it all, but I want to do my best to try."

It was such a Mitch answer, but Sam looked into that life with sadness, because much as he wanted to have that experience, too, he couldn't see a way to be a part of it without being Mitch's special delivery forever. "So nowhere is home to you, then?"

Mitch rubbed his thumb along the wheel for a second before answering. "Home isn't a place, for me," he said at last.

He seemed to be waiting for something, but Sam didn't know what he was supposed to say to that, so he settled in and watched the mountains go by again.

They stopped in Vail, and Sam spread more ashes, though not very much. There weren't, he realized, very many left. It made him sad, even though he was happy he'd taken her along and spread her everywhere, because he knew she'd rather have taken a trip across the West than sit forever on Aunt Delia's shelf. But he realized she wouldn't ever sit on that shelf, not anymore. She was everywhere now, all over the whole west, and she was in so many rivers and flowers and valleys that she'd just keep going, and going, and going. The woman who had spent so much of her life tied down, by her life or by her disease, would never be tied down again. Blinking back tears, Sam tipped the little that remained of her into the rainbow glass chest, and as the secret plan formed inside his mind, it filled him with joy and hope and sorrow all at once.

By afternoon they were in Denver again. They had come full circle.

They didn't stop, though, until Sterling, and they weren't there for very long. They pushed on, across the flat of eastern Colorado to the western edge of Nebraska, where the Platte River greeted them once again, and where, to Sam's quiet delight, the oaks and ash and maples bowed over its banks, greeting him.

That night Mitch parked them at a rest stop, not in a town, and he stopped early. He led Sam to a picnic table, which he decorated with a cloth—one of the spare sheets—and to Sam's surprise and delight, prepared for him a barbeque of steaks, potatoes, and at the end, roasted marshmallows, for which he had graham crackers and chocolate bars to make s'mores, though they ate several of the marshmallows simply plain.

"I would have made tamales," Mitch said, popping another marshmallow in Sam's mouth, "but you really have to have a kitchen for that."

"It was lovely," Sam acknowledged. He kissed him in thanks.

They sat at the picnic table a long time, watching the sun set over the river. They were far back from the parking lot, where the cars and trucks came and went, and in that little square of space, they made their own world. When night fell and the mosquitoes came out, Mitch

fetched a blanket and wrapped them together in it, and when that wasn't enough, he brought out a can of bug spray. He also produced a bottle of sparkling wine.

"I wanted you to have a good night to remember for the last," he said a little gruffly when Sam commented on the extravagance of it all.

The thought, predictably, made Sam sad, and he sank deeper into Mitch's arms. *I will miss you, so much.* He wanted to say it, but he couldn't. He could hardly say anything. Randy's admonitions echoed loudly in his ears, but Sam was more tongue-tied now than he'd been at the restaurant. He thought of Mitch's arms, so warm and steady wrapped around him, and he thought of leaving them, even for a minute, and he didn't know how he was ever going to do it.

He started to shake, and Mitch drew him tighter into his arms, pressing kisses into his hair.

"Sunshine," he whispered, "you have to tell me what you want."

To stay with you. To never go home. To never finish school, to never look back, to have this moment go on forever and never end. But those thoughts felt so childish, so wrong, even though he knew nothing about leaving Mitch was right. "I don't know," he whispered, and buried his face in Mitch's shirt. He swallowed, then swallowed again and whispered, brokenly, "You. I want you."

The arms came closer around him still, and the kiss burrowed deeper into his hair. "That," he said, very gruffly, "you already have."

Sam wanted to sob, and part of him thought he should, and would have to later, but right now he wanted to be in control, and so he fought himself until he could speak again. "I have to go back," he whispered. "I have to go back and face what I left. I have to finish school. I have to—" He clenched his fists and released them. "—grow up."

"For the record," Mitch said, "you're more grown up right now, I think, than I am. But I know what you mean. You gotta finish what you started."

Sam nodded. "I don't really want to. But I have to."

There was a pause, and then Mitch said, "Do—do you want me to come with you?"

Sam lifted his head and looked at him.

He meant it, he could tell, and it touched Sam. Mitch really would stop driving around the country and drive around Iowa instead, to be

with Sam. He would live in Middleton, just for Sam. And as Sam looked at him, searching him for sincerity, trying to be adult about it, he even had to admit that maybe, just maybe, Mitch wouldn't even mind being tied down. At least for a while.

But Sam saw the rest, too, and with great reluctance, he shook his head.

"I mean—I do want you to come," he said quickly. "But you'd just try to fix things that I need to fix myself."

"Sunshine," Mitch said, a little agitated, "you don't get points for doing everything by yourself. Trust me on this one. All you end up is lonely."

"But I need to learn *how*, Mitch. I need to go and get my own apartment. I need to make sure I have the right job. I need to figure out how to pay for school on my own and not let myself get caught up in my aunt and uncle's issues. I need to show *myself* I can do this." But as soon as he said it out loud, it sounded trite, and doubt swamped him again. Sam felt heavy as he placed his hand on Mitch's chest. "I don't know. Maybe I'm being stupid again."

"You aren't being stupid, Sam," Mitch said with heavy regret. "You're being smart. Smarter, in this case, than me." He tipped Sam's chin up and looked at him with deep sorrow. "I will miss you, Sam Keller."

The tears that had been threatening finally won, and Sam wiped them fiercely away. "Mitch," he whispered and sobbed, once, silently, as Mitch kissed him.

"Hush, Sunshine," he said, and kissed him again, and again, and again. He nuzzled Sam's nose and nipped at it. "And I believe I warned you about using that word."

Stupid. Sam half-laughed, half-cried. "Sorry."

"That's okay," Mitch said, "I think I found the perfect punishment."

He kissed him once more, slowly, deeply, thoroughly, and when Sam wrapped his arms around his neck, he pushed them slowly back against the table, knocking the remainder of their picnic and the last of the champagne onto the ground. He laid Sam onto the sheet and braced himself over him, pausing only briefly to tuck something into his pocket. Then he smiled at Sam, just a little sadly, and kissed him again.

THEY made epic love that night. They started on the table. Then they moved to the grass beside the table. They had another pause on the way back to Old Blue, where they made out on the floor, and, finally, they ended up on the bed.

"Undress for me," Mitch whispered, and Sam did, slowly at first, and as Mitch's eyes darkened, he moved faster, but he fumbled. Mitch reached out to him, drawing him close, and he took over, shedding Sam's jeans and socks until he stood in only his underwear, which Sam stepped out of, and then he was nude.

He cried out as Mitch kissed his chest, trailing his tongue down his sternum, leaving a moist path across his skin as he made his way toward Sam's navel and on to his groin. Sam clutched at Mitch's head as he took Sam's cock into his mouth, but it wasn't long before he was pushing Mitch back against the bed, straddling him backward as he aimed himself at Mitch's belt buckle. He gasped and cried out as Mitch suckled him, fumbling with Mitch's zipper until he'd freed him, and then he bent, aching, to take Mitch into his mouth.

He kept his eyes open, watching him. He took in the sight of Mitch's cock, long and pink and ridged with veins he knew so well, and Sam's chest tightened as he realized this might be the last time he ever looked at it again. He memorized every plane of Mitch's body, reviewing every part of him with eyes and mouth and hands, his head spinning and soul aching, because he could not imagine being without this man, not for a minute.

How? he thought, a sob mixing with his orgasm as Mitch thrust inside him. How was he supposed to let him go?

When they were both sated, Sam wrapped himself tight against Mitch and held on as if he meant to never let go.

"Wake me in the morning with you," he whispered into the hair of Mitch's chest. "Wake me up as soon as you are."

"I will," Mitch promised, and he did, just as the sun was rising. They made coffee and drank it together, nibbled on leftover steak for breakfast, took showers, kissed a little more on the bed, made love again, and when there was nothing left to do, they were on the road for the last time. By noon, they were in Omaha, and Sam watched with a

strange mixture of emotions as they crossed the Missouri and the sign on the bridge read, "Welcome to Iowa."

By three, they were turning north to Middleton.

Mitch took him all the way into town, past the truck stop where he'd parked on their first date, down the hill into downtown, past the pharmacy, and out up into the developments. Sam watched it all as if through water, not really believing he was back, unable to let himself think about the fact that Mitch was about to go. But at last Mitch admitted he couldn't go any farther with the rig, and he parked Old Blue in the place Sam had first seen it, on the highway at the bottom of Cherry Hill.

It took Sam an hour to get out of the semi.

They sat back on the bed awhile, kissing and embracing, and then, inevitably, they made love one more time. When they were done, Sam reached over to the floor, fished in his pocket, and took out his iPhone and the charger, and he handed them to Mitch.

"I want you to keep Judy," he said.

Mitch looked at him like he'd grown a head. "I can't keep your cell phone!"

"You use it all the time," Sam argued. "You use it more than I ever did. You need one, and really, I don't. I never did. I just wanted it." He pressed it into his hand. "I like the idea of knowing you have it."

"But it's your phone," Mitch said. "You pay for the plan!"

Sam shrugged. "I'll get a pay-as-you-go. It's all I need, really."

Mitch grimaced, and Sam braced, ready to duke this one out, but all of a sudden, Mitch relented. He got up, went to the front of the rig and came back with his own.

"I'll take it," he said, "but you have to take mine, then, in exchange."

Sam took the small, rugged phone gingerly. *Mitch's phone*. He was truly ridiculous, but he knew with this he'd never miss Judy. *Why am I leaving him again?* He cleared his throat. "What about your work numbers?"

"I never entered them. They're all in a book. And nobody calls me, but if they do, you can just text them on to me." He held up the iPhone. "You sure you want to give up yours?"

"Three people text me, Mitch, and I'll see them all in the next twenty four hours." His stomach knotted at the thought, and he wrapped his arms around his chest.

Mitch sat down beside him and rubbed his back. "Why don't I stay in town for a few days, just to make sure you're settled."

The thought was so tempting. "Don't you have to get to Chicago?"

He shrugged. "It'll just be a fine. It doesn't matter." Sam heard the unspoken, *not like you do.*

But even as the yearning filled him, Sam shook his head. "It'll just be harder." Sorrow rose up and choked him, and he leaned into the warmth of Mitch's body.

Mitch held him. "You only have to call me, Sam. One call, and I'll come. And you have to call me when you know what you want, even if it's to say goodbye. Which might be what you decide," Mitch said when Sam started to object. "And it's okay. Obviously it's not what I want, but this isn't about me."

"Why isn't it?" Sam asked, because he was starting to get confused on this point. "Why is it only up to me? Why can't I ask what you want?"

"Because you're the one who's twenty-one, Sunshine. You're the one whose whole life has turned crazy and who doesn't know where to set it down now. Everything you said to me last night is true. But me, it's all the same. There's just you or not you. I'll wait to see which it is."

"That doesn't sound fair."

Mitch chuckled into his hair. "That, Sam, is life."

They held each other a little longer, swaying softly side to side. They kissed again, so tenderly it nearly broke Sam's heart. Then, at last, it was time to go.

Mitch helped him down, fussed over his pack, and asked him, several times, if he had everything.

"Your glass box," he said, starting back inside.

Sam stopped him. This part was even harder. "No," he said. "I want you to take it with you."

Mitch stopped. "Sam, you said that reminded you of your mom."

Sam nodded. His throat was so thick. “I put the rest of her inside. I want you to take her with you, to see the country. Just let her ride along and soak it all up. Maybe take her out sometimes and let her see something pretty. She’ll have so much more fun than sitting on a mantel or a dresser.”

Mitch kissed him again then, very hard, and when he started to pull away, Sam stopped him, leaned in close to his ear and whispered, “I love you.”

Mitch stilled, gripped him hard, and kissed his cheek. “I love you, too, Sunshine.”

People in nearby yards and in cars passing by were watching them, people, this time, that Sam knew. And he didn’t care, not when Mitch took him into a fierce embrace, or when he tweaked his ass, or when he pressed their foreheads together as they both fought off tears. He didn’t care what they saw, not any more. He hoped he never would again.

“Good-bye, Sam.” Mitch stroked his cheek. He smiled and added, “Call me soon.”

Sam couldn’t say anything, just stood there, screaming silently inside his head as he waved and tried to smile, standing on the hill of his hometown, watching the man he loved drive away.

Chapter 13

COMING home was both harder and easier than Sam imagined, and most of what happened after Mitch left surprised the hell out of him.

His aunt and uncle, as he knew they would be, were furious. Delia was, anyway. Norm just sat at his computer, as usual. But Sam didn't let Delia go on her tirade. He interrupted her to say he knew she was right, at least in part, and that he intended to move out as soon as he could find a place to live. He also gave notice for his job, giving them the option to fire him now for not showing up for ten days or asking him to work for two weeks to make up for his absence. But he had no choice on the money for school.

"There really isn't anything I can do," he said as patiently and as calmly as he could. "They offered me a few scholarships, and I intend to take them, but there really is no way I can get loans from anyone because of the tax thing, because of your income. It's a dumb rule, but no matter what, they said they can't bend it. I talked to the bank, too, hoping maybe we could work something out, but honestly, that's a no-go as well. And I know you don't like this, but I want to go full time this fall. I want to finish, Delia. I want to move on with my life. I want to see things and do things. I can't do that if I'm living in your basement, taking so long to get through school I'm gray-haired by the time I get out." He ran a hand through his hair. "So I don't know what we do, but I'm open to ideas. I've turned everything I can think of inside out."

Delia sputtered, cycling through her old talking points, and Sam's heart was heavy, knowing that though he'd done his best, nothing here had changed. And then, suddenly, it was completely different.

Uncle Norm turned away from his computer, looked at Sam a moment, then said, "I'll cut you a loan."

"Norman!" Delia cried, but Norm just looked at Sam and ignored her again.

"I'll find out what the rates are at the bank, and I'll match them. I won't collect until you have your first job, and we can work out payments then, but I will collect, so plan accordingly. Just write me up a list of what you need for school, and books, and *moderate* living estimates. Then I'll write it up with my lawyer, and I'll cut you a check. Oh, and as for apartments, you can have your pick of any of ours."

"*Norman!*" Delia cried again, and she sat down. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing. But that's the most adult with you he's ever been, and if we don't reward him for that, he'll never turn into a man." Norm nodded at Sam as he turned back to his computer. "And he'll never leave the basement." He looked at Sam over the top of his glasses. "The other part of the bargain, however, is that you will continue to work in the pharmacy. And if you're serious about it, I'll give you more hours as a tech, which is more money and better practice for school."

"Okay," Sam said, a little blown away. Delia just stared at Norm, mouth gaping, but Sam sensed the audience was over and went to the basement.

He ended up moving in with Emma after all.

She'd hugged him in a flying tackle when he went over to her house to ask her—walking, because his car was still impounded from being left by the side of the road—and she asked him to tell her everything about the trip. He told her as much as he could, but he edited a lot, not because he was embarrassed, but because it was private, and it was still tender. He steered her to talk of the apartment instead, and within three hours they were touring one on the hill to downtown.

By Monday, they'd signed for it, and by the end of the next week, they were moving in.

He worked hard all the rest of the summer until classes started in August, and by then he had, actually, quite a bit of money saved, even with rent, and he ended up taking almost a thousand off his estimate for Uncle Norm. He paid his tuition in full, and he went to class for the first time full-time, and when Keith Jameson gave him a leer, Sam just waved and walked on by. Darin followed him around awhile, but eventually he latched onto a slightly overweight first-year student who, by all accounts, not only held out on him until he cleaned up his apartment for real this time, but also got him to actually turn in enough homework to pass.

Things were looking up for Emma, too, as by the end of August she and Straight Steve the Pharmacist were dating.

It had turned out that his hesitation was because Delia had warned him he wouldn't be kept on if he dated the techs. When Emma heard this, she'd been ready to quit, but Steve told her not to, promising that, if it came to it, *he'd* quit, because pharmacist jobs were thick on the ground even in Iowa, and he could get a job anywhere. They started to date, Delia decided to become blind as far as their relationship was concerned, and the next thing Sam knew Steve was practically living with them. He really was a nice guy, and he was good for Emma. It was good to see her so happy.

Seeing them together, though, only reminded Sam of the call he had promised to make to Mitch, a call which, by September, he still hadn't made.

He looked at the photos of the trip all the time, flipping through them on the Internet album he'd loaded them to before he gave away his phone. Every now and again he texted Mitch to tell him that someone had called or to just to check on him, to see how he was doing. Mitch always said he was good and that Sam's mother was enjoying herself, and always, always he said to call him soon.

Sam wanted to. He really, really wanted to, more every day than the day before. Every day felt emptier without him, even as he put his life together as he never had before. Every brick he put in place without Mitch felt hollow. Part of what he learned by being apart from Mitch was that he honestly did love him, that he didn't want Mitch to take care of him, that he just wanted to be with him, because life was brighter and more interesting with him in it. He understood, too, what Mitch had said about not getting any points for doing everything

himself. He needed his uncle and his money, and he needed Emma to help with the rent and to remind him to eat.

But the problem was he also learned that he needed to work. He missed Mitch, but he didn't miss feeling like his piece on the side, the cute little boy who had come along for the ride. He was getting better grades now that he wasn't so distracted, and he was starting to get excited about getting a real job and doing this nursing thing for real. And that was the *big* problem.

How could he get a job and still be with Mitch? Would it be better or worse to just see him when he blew into town? Would Mitch, the self-confessed gypsy, truly be happy to stay put? He kept trying to write out a compromise in his head, but he couldn't make it work, no matter how he tried. And so he let time wear on and on, aching more and more with each day, but not knowing how to make his misery end.

In October, Randy called him.

Sam hadn't known it was him, at first—he'd seen the number and not recognized it, and almost hadn't answered it because he assumed it was a straggler message for Mitch. But he had, and before he even had "hello" out of his mouth, his ear was full of swearing.

"What the fuck are you doing?! Why the hell aren't you calling him, you little shit?"

Sam blinked and said, "Randy?"

"Peaches—seriously, what the fuck is going on?"

Sam, who had been halfway out the door, put his backpack down and sat down at the kitchen table. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You haven't called him. Not even to say hello. He's going crazy, Sam, and now he's calling *me*, and he's *talking all the time*, and he never does this, so I'm worried, and now *I'm* going crazy!"

Sam clutched hard at the phone. "Randy, I don't know how."

"To use a phone?"

"No!" Sam said, angry, and he told Randy all his reservations, all his fears, and all his unworkable solutions, and then he sank back in his chair, so depressed he couldn't even straighten his spine.

For a minute Randy was silent, and then he said, very quietly, “Peaches, I love you very much.”

Sam ached even more. Even Randy could see this was hopeless. “I love you, too, Randy.”

“Good. Sam Keller, *you are a fucking idiot.*”

Sam sat up. “Hey!”

“You by a computer, sweetheart? Get to one right now, go into Google, and type in three words. Let me know when you’re ready.”

Wary, and still irritated, Sam went to his laptop, opened it up, and fired up his browser. “Okay, what are the words?”

“Travel nursing jobs.”

Sam’s breath caught, and something flickered in his heart, but he quelled it, thinking, *no, it can’t be that easy*. But then he hit “search,” and he saw what came up, and his eyes went wide. Job after job after job, positions around the country, from six weeks to fourteen. Still disbelieving, Sam clicked on one site, and then another, and another, and then, very quietly, he started to cry.

“Personally, I’m a fan of American Mobile, based on the limited research I did,” Randy said when the silence went on too long. “But you need to make sure you get something with killer insurance, unless it works out that if you base out of Iowa that you’re covered on Mitch’s wherever you go. Most of them really are good, though, for benefits. And, I might add, there are always a lot of openings in Vegas.”

“You knew about this?” Sam whispered, brokenly, because he was still crying. “Why didn’t you *say*?”

“Because I didn’t know you didn’t know! Jesus, Sam, I figured they’d have posters taped to your head with this shit.”

“I didn’t know,” Sam whispered, and he cried again for awhile.

“Now, calm down,” Randy said, unsettled. “Honestly, you’re both hopeless. I have no idea what the two of you would do without me.”

“Me either,” Sam said, smiling at the phone. “Thank you.”

“Call him now,” Randy said, blew him a kiss, and hung up.

Sam waited until he’d recovered, but his hands started shaking as soon as he dialed, and when it finally rang and his own voice message

came on, he choked up again, and all he could manage to say was, “Mitch—please come home.”

Then, because he was already late, he left so he could get to class. But he kept his phone on even though there were signs in every classroom to turn them off, and he checked it every few minutes to make sure he hadn’t somehow missed Mitch’s call. At six o’clock, though, he still hadn’t, and he hadn’t by nine, either, or ten, or ten thirty, and when Sam woke up at five with the phone in his hand, it still hadn't.

“Call again,” Emma suggested, when he couldn’t eat his breakfast because his stomach hurt so bad.

“I waited too long,” Sam whispered, aching so bad his teeth hurt. “I made him angry. I waited too long.”

“Call him,” Emma said. She spread her books out across the table to do her homework.

Sam didn’t have class until nine, but he couldn’t do his homework, couldn’t do anything but clutch the phone and pace the apartment, and when he couldn’t stand that anymore, he stood at the window, looking down at Middleton with heartsick despair.

And as he stood there, despondent and terrified at what he’d left undone, he saw the semi and trailer go by, right beneath his window, heading down the hill into downtown, just a little bit faster than it was supposed to be going on Main Street.

The semi cab was blue.

Sam shouted, then shouted again. Then he dashed across the apartment, grabbed his shoes, and tore frantically down the stairs. He was wearing the boxers and T-shirt that were his pajamas. He didn’t care.

It might not be him, he cautioned himself. *You could just be seeing things,* but his heart was sick of reason and caution and didn’t care. It had to be Mitch. It had to be him—it *looked* like Old Blue, and Mitch had said he’d come as soon as he called. It was him. It had to be.

And as Sam came down the hill and looked ahead to the pharmacy, he saw that, in fact, it was.

Old Blue was blocking the whole right lane, her flashers going, and everyone on Main Street in Middleton was standing around,

pointing and whispering, wondering what was going on. Sam ran faster, not caring that his lungs were so overworked they were liable to explode. Mitch was here.

Mitch had come for him.

And there he was, standing on the sidewalk, looking at a piece of paper in his hand. Then he looked up the hill, saw Sam, smiled, and he began running too.

They met like a movie ending, launching into each other's arms, but unlike a movie, they banged together, hit heads, and came down laughing, not kissing, not at first, and then their mouths met, and though Sam knew all of Middleton would talk of this for *years*, he kissed Mitch back and wrapped his arms around his neck, fully intending to never let him go again.

"There's a job"—Sam stopped for breath—"service, online—Randy found it!" He kissed Mitch hard once more on the mouth, just because he could. "I can go with you, Mitch! I can go *with* you!"

"Is that why you've been waiting?" He tweaked Sam's nose. "Sunshine, I would have stayed wherever you were, as long as you needed to. And I will, until you're done with school."

"But you need to travel," Sam said. "That's who you are—you want to see the country! I can't hold you back."

Mitch laughed. "Sam, I've done nothing but drive loads up and down I-80 between Chicago and Omaha ever since I dropped you off. I couldn't go any farther, because I wanted to be close enough to come right away as soon as you called. You caught me heading *into* Chicago, so I had to dump my load first, before I could come back. I drove here deadhead because I didn't want to wait to pick anything up." He smiled at Sam. "Just you."

A police car pulled up behind Old Blue, and an officer got out and came over. It was a guy Sam knew from high school. "Sir," he said to Mitch, "you'll have to move your rig. You're blocking traffic."

Mitch nodded, but held up a hand. "I just need one minute. Maybe two." He turned to Sam, looking nervous, but determined. "You asked me before I left what I wanted, and I didn't tell you. Can I tell you now?"

Sam nodded, wondering what this was about. He saw Emma come up beside him out of the corner of his eye, and he saw her eyes widen as she backed up, beaming.

“Sure,” Sam said, and he looked up at his lover. “What do you want, Mitch?”

Mitch almost went green for a moment, and then, carefully, went down onto the sidewalk on one knee. Sam’s head began to spin. *He isn’t, no he isn’t,* reason whispered, as his heart hoped, and then as Mitch’s hand came out of his pocket holding two silver rings, Sam’s heart soared, because he realized that, actually, Mitch was.

With half the town watching, Mitch Tedsoe took Sam’s hand and said, “Sunshine, will you marry me?”

Sam heard Emma’s strangled, joyful cry from behind him. He saw his aunt’s shocked face through the windows of the pharmacy. He saw them all, but mostly he saw Mitch and the beautiful, wonderful, better-than-he-ever-dreamed future expanding out before them both as a smile split his face so wide that it hurt.

“Yes,” Sam said, his heart so full he was laughing. “Yes.”

HEIDI CULLINAN has always loved a good love story, provided it has a happy ending. She enjoys writing across many genres but loves above all to write happy, romantic endings for LGBT characters because there just aren't enough of those stories out there. When Heidi isn't writing, she enjoys cooking, reading, knitting, listening to music, and watching television with her family. Heidi also volunteers frequently for her state's LGBT rights group, One Iowa, and is proud to be from the first Midwestern state to legalize same-sex marriage.

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